NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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A WIZARD OF THE HIGHWAY

OR NICK CARTER'S TEST OF FAITH

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

As he stepped forward and peered through the grating into the other cell, he uttered a startled cry. Stretched upon a cot was the motionless and apparently lifeless body of Nick Carter.

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A WIZARD OF THE HIGHWAY;

OR,

Nick Carter's Test of Faith.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE WIZARD OF THE ROAD

The great, four-cylinder Peerless was rushing through the night at a rate of speed which was certainly not less than sixty miles an hour.

The road was perfectly straight and smooth, and was, in fact, macadamized; and it was, moreover, wide, and as level as a billiard-table.

The night itself was dark, intensely dark, one of those black nights when the clouds hang low and threatening, and when the air is so filled with moisture that, although rain does not really fall, one's clothing soon becomes saturated with the wet.

On either side of the highway, a high stone wall bordered it, and beyond these walls rose high trees, mostly elms, which stood like sentinels—if one could have seen them through that impenetrable darkness—along the thoroughfare.

Suddenly, something loomed ahead of the machine—a something that was blank, like a wall of rock, or like the smooth face of a cliff.

The glaring lamps of the automobile lighted up the road for many rods in advance of it, and they showed every pebble in the way; but so rapidly was the machine running—a mile a minute, you know, is getting over the road at a great rate—that little things within the rays of the light appeared and disappeared as if with magic.

Nick Carter jammed on the emergency brake with a suddenness which brought the big car to a stop within five times its own length, and it was so close to the obstruction that there was barely standing-room between it and the forward wheels.

With the sudden stopping of the machine, Nick Carter leaped from his seat under the steering-wheel, and was on the ground before the brake had ceased to grind.

But, even as he leaped, a strange thing occurred.

There came a hiss like the singing of a whip-lash

through the air, and the obstruction—whatever it may have been—disappeared in the twinkling of an eye.

It was gone—entirely gone; and the roadway showed entirely clear ahead of the automobile.

The thing happened so quickly that the apparent obstruction was gone before the detective had time more than to regain his equilibrium after touching the ground with his feet; and then, as he leaped forward to the place where the apparition that had looked so much like a rock had been, it was gone.

He had heard that swishing noise, like the singing of a whip-lash, and now, as he stopped suddenly, amazed to see that the road was perfectly clear ahead of them, a loud laugh rang out from the darkness to the right.

It was a high, mocking, taunting laugh; a jeer, in fact; and it proceeded from the black darkness a dozen rods or more away from where the machine had halted.

As quick as a flash, Nick Carter wheeled.

His right arm shot out; there was a flash and a sharp report, and a bullet sped spitefully toward the very spot from which that mocking cry had proceeded.

Instantly there was another sound, exactly like the first; but this time it proceeded from the opposite side of the road—that is, away off to the left—and it was a high, jeering, mocking peal of laughter, like the first.

The detective's left arm shot out as the right one had done, and a second bullet was sped on its way toward this second sound.

For an instant after that, there was silence, and then, as if there were a chorus of those hyenalike voices surrounding the spot, a perfect medley of shouting laughter came from every point, half point and quarter point of the compass at once; and they jeered and cried, they screamed and catcalled, they screeched and they bellowed, they yodeled and they groaned—and then all was quiet again, and there was not a sound to disturb the utter stillness of the night.

By this time, the other occupants of the machine had leaped to the ground, and they were grouped around the detective, each with his revolver ready for instant use; and these others were Patsy, Ten-Ichi, and Nick Carter's young millionaire friend, Rex Pentecost.

"Get back to your places!" ordered the detective instantly; and then he took a step nearer to the machine.

He seized the handle of the powerful search-light. He turned it this way and that. He shot the fierce and searching shaft of illumination to the right and to the left of them.

He lighted up the trees to the north and to the south; he ran the gleam of light along either of the stone walls; he searched the ditches and the roadway with it.

It showed up every twig, and leaf, and stone, and every blade of grass. It left nothing unrevealed—and yet it brought into view nothing that did not belong there.

There was nothing to tell them what that obstruction in the road might have been before it was so suddenly and mysteriously removed; there was nothing to assure them that another human being save themselves had been in that neighborhood; and, after a quarter of an hour spent in useless activity with the light, Nick Carter made it stationary straight ahead, and mounted again to the seat under the wheel.

"We won't do any talking here," he said, when Pentecost, who occupied the seat beside him, would have spoken. "Keep silent until I get ready to talk."

Then the Peerless shot ahead again, and had soon left the scene of their mysterious experience far behind them.

And there was not a word spoken among the four until after they arrived at a road-house, and had come to a stop there in order to replenish the gasoline tank; and, even then, the detective commanded silence until the purpose of their stay there was fulfilled, and they were careering along the road again.

He slowed the machine down presently, and remarked:

"You had something on your mind, Rex, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes. Only, it wasn't much. It was, in fact, a very trite remark. I was merely going to assert something that you knew perfectly well already."

"And that was——"

"I was about to observe that we had encountered the wizard of the highway."

"Correct, Reginald. You may go up to the head of the class," replied Nick dryly.

"Well," persisted Pentecost, "it is something to have encountered him——"

"Or her, or it, or them, or those, or they, or—what?"

Nick stopped, and laughed outright.

"Sure, I would call the thing an It," said Patsy, from the back seat. "Faith, chief, if that blooming thing ahead of us wasn't a rock, then I never saw one. It looked as big as a church, too."

"Almost; that's a fact, Patsy; but, in reality——"

It was Ten-Ichi who interrupted this time.

"In reality," he said, "it was a big, square piece of canvas, that has been stained or painted to look like a rock, and it was strung across the road purposely to frighten us—or, at least, to frighten anybody who might run up against it just as we did."

"We didn't quite run against it," said Pentecost. "Nick was too quick for that," and here Nick Carter laughed again.

"It seems to me," he said, "that we were up against it rather hard. But you are correct, boys. There is no doubt that the thing was the work of the Wizard of the Highway, and that we have at last discovered his present lurking-place."

"I wonder why he didn't try to rob us? Eh?" asked Rex.

"Well, for one thing," replied Nick, "we weren't quite sufficiently scared for his purposes. Then, again, I have an

idea that those bullets of mine sang uncomfortably close to the ears of the two who did the screeching before they regaled us with the chorus. I couldn't see anything to shoot at, and one cannot very well put a bullet-hole through a sound; but, all the same, one can send lead quite close to it, and I have a fancy that I did that much."

They were all silent after that, and Nick started the machine ahead again at accelerated pace, so that they quickly covered the three remaining miles to their destination.

The automobile was turned through a gateway between two high posts, and thence traveled a winding road among a forest of huge trees, ascending a gradual rise of ground, until, at last, the detective brought the car to a stop directly in front of a white-pillared house, and beneath a wide porte cochere under which an electric light was gleaming brightly.

It was Nick Carter's country home, lately purchased and renovated, until he had transformed it into an ideal place; and the old colonial house, surrounded by a hundred acres of primeval forest, and that, in turn by five hundred more acres of arable and timber land, was the domain which the detective called home in the true sense of the word.

It was his place of rest and recreation after the incessant turmoil of his daily life in the city in the pursuit of his profession, and the only people who were aware that he possessed it were the members of his own official family—that is to say, his assistants—and a very few chosen friends.

Among the latter, Reginald Pentecost was one.

And now, reader, a word concerning the presence of the four—Nick, with two of his assistants, and Reginald Pentecost—in the detective's big automobile at that time at that particular spot, and also regarding the reference made to a certain Wizard of the Highway, as made by Rex Pentecost.

During several months, the outlying roads around New York had been infested by highwaymen. Many of these were common footpads, who only watched for an opportunity when an automobile had broken down, or, for some reason, had become disabled, to steal up silently upon its owner and his guests, to terrorize them with revolvers, and to rob them at their leisure.

Others had been more professional in their conduct—as witness the career of Captain Satan, so quickly brought to a close by the detective when once he got upon his track.

But Captain Satan had his successors—his followers, his emulators, and the highways and byways around New York had of late become almost as perilous for the motoring parties as were the thoroughfares around the old city of London in the days of Claude Duval.

A month had elapsed since the arrest and conviction of Captain Satan, with his wife and two daughters, and for two weeks after that the highways had been comparatively safe for the automobilists to travel; but, after that short lapse of time, a new "knight of the road" had sprung into existence, and had made himself generally feared and dreaded.

His methods—we use the masculine pronoun merely to designate this remarkable individual who seemed to captain the highway robbers—were entirely different from those of any of his predecessors, and because he always succeeded in stopping any machine he wished to halt, no matter at what rate of speed it was traveling; and because he always succeeded in robbing the occupants of the car without once showing himself in person at all—he had been named, by those who had suffered at his hands, "The Wizard of the Highway."

The wizard never committed a robbery twice in the same place. He never twice adopted the same method. Always he had something new with which to startle, and to bring to a halt, the chauffeur of a rapidly moving machine; as, for example, the sudden apparition of the rock in the middle of the road, which had induced Nick Carter to jam on his emergency brake the instant he saw it.

So many complaints had been made to the detective about this same wizard that, without being retained by anybody at all, he had determined, on his own account, to rid the road of this daring highwayman; and so he had left his man Joseph in charge of the city house, to tell all who should inquire for the detective that he was absent from home for two weeks, and then, with Patsy and Ten-Ichi, and Reginald Pentecost, he had started that very night for his country home in Connecticut, from which point, as his headquarters, he intended to devote his time exclusively to the capture of "The Wizard of the Highway" until that interesting event was fully accomplished.

CHAPTER II.

THE ROBBING OF JAMES DOREMUS.

At half-past four o'clock, the morning following upon the event just recorded, the detective was roused from his sleep by his butler, who came softly into his room, and announced:

"Beg pardon, Mr. Carter, but they insisted that I should call you. I told them that you had been in bed less than three hours, but it made no difference. The gentleman says that he knows you, and that——"

"What in the world are you jabbering about, Jackson?" demanded the detective, sitting up in bed, and pushing the button which started the lights in the chandelier. "What is the matter with you?"

"Please, sir, there are two gentlemen and three ladies down-stairs, who say that they must see you at once. At first, I would not let them inside the house, but one of the gentlemen said that he knew you quite well, knew that you lived here, and——"

"Who is he?"

"Mr. James Doremus, sir," replied Jackson.

"What! Jim Doremus? Certainly you did right to let him in. Who did you say is with him?"

"Another gentleman, and three ladies, sir; and——"

"Jackson, you talk too much. Answer questions."

"Yes, sir."

"What do they want?"

"You, sir."

"What for?"

"They have been robbed, sir."

"Robbed, eh? When, and where, and how?"

"Not very long ago, I think, sir; somewhere back on the road. Mr. Doremus, he said, sir, that I was to tell you that they had met 'The Wizard of the Highway,' and that——"

"The devil you say!"

"No, sir, 'The Wizard of the——'"

"Yes, I know; but it is pretty much the same thing. Did they drive up in an auto?"

"No, sir; they walked."

"Walked!"

"That wizard, sir, he took their automobile away from them."

"Great Scott! You don't say so. Skip back downstairs, Jackson, and make them as comfortable as you can. Get something to eat, and drink, and smoke for them. Tell them that I will be down in a short time."

"Yes, sir."

Fifteen minutes later, the detective entered the dining-room, where he found his unexpected guests rapidly forgetting their troubles in the enjoyment of the good things that Jackson had set before them.

"This is rather an early morning call," said Nick, as he entered the room. "All the same, I am glad to see you, and also glad that I happened to be here to receive you. I only arrived myself some time after midnight, Jim."

"Hello, Nick!" exclaimed Doremus, leaping to his feet, and rushing forward with extended hand. "Here, before I say a word, let me present my friends. This is Jack Hathorne—you have heard me speak of him so often that you know him already—and this is Miss Hathorne and Miss Edith Hathorne, his sisters. My wife you already know. Beastly of us, to pull you out of bed at this unearthly hour; eh?"

"Not at all. I don't mind in the least. But what is this that Jackson has been trying to tell me about your being robbed?"

"Why, we met the 'wiz,' that's all. He cleaned us out, too."

"Automobile, and all, eh?"

"The whole shooting-match, Nick. Watches, jewelry, money—and machine. Nothing left."

"Where did it happen?"

"Not far from here. Not more than a mile or so from your gate, I should say. Luckily, I happened to know how to find this place; otherwise, I don't know what we would have done. I knew this house, and visited it often before you owned it, and so——"

"Yes; but tell me about the robbery."

"There isn't anything to relate, only what I have already told you."

"How were you stopped on the road?" asked the detective.

"With Greek fire—I believe they call it Greek fire, don't they?"

"You will have to tell me what it was like before I can answer that question."

"Well, if it had happened on the fourth of July, I should have called it red fire. We were driving along the road—not very fast, about thirty or thirty-five miles an hour, I should say, when, directly in front of us, the whole highway was suddenly lighted up with red fire, while, directly between us and the fire, I saw a huge rope-net stretched across the road, to catch us if we didn't stop."

"And so you stopped, eh?"

"Stopped! Jove! I'm stopping yet, ain't I? I haven't started on since."

"Go ahead with your yarn."

"Oh, it's a peach! It's a beaut, Nick! Nothing like it this side of genuine romance. It reminded me of a story I read when I was a boy. I remember the title now. It was called 'Fillipo, the Bandit; or, The Necromancer of Monte Gargano.'"

"Tell me the story," insisted Nick, laughing.

"Well, it was all about——"

"No, no! Not that story; your own."

"Oh! Well, when I brought the machine to a stop, there was a perfect chorus of demoniac laughter all around us. It seemed to come from every conceivable direction at once; and the devils hooted and jeered, and screeched and laughed, until I'd be willing to bet a ten-spot that their throats were sore."

"Well?"

"At the end of the chorus, a voice off to the right, in the darkness, called out:

"'Every person in that automobile is covered by a revolver. If you attempt to start the machine, or refuse to obey orders as they are given to you, you will all be killed.'

"'Oh, stow all that!' I answered. 'Tell us what you want. Come out and show yourself, if you're not——'

"'Silence!' commanded the voice; and I replied: 'Yes, sir!' very humbly.

"Well, he kept still for a minute after that, and then he said:

"'Get down out of that machine, one by one. Walk forward until you stand in the glare of the light. When you have done that, you are to place all your valuables in the middle of the road, where I can see you do it.

Your watches, your rings, your jewels, and your money. If you don't shell out *all* you've got, I will know it, and it will be the worse for you.'

"Well, Nick, I got out first, my wife followed me, and then came Jack and his sisters—and we shelled out according to Hoyle, or according to the wizard, which is the same thing.

"'Are you going to rob the ladies, too?' I asked of the darkness, for we hadn't seen a sign of a human being.

"'Silence!' came the reply. 'Do as you are told to do!'

"Well, we did it. I had three one-thousand-dollar bills in the inside pocket of my waistcoat, and I forgot all about that; but, bless you! the wizard didn't."

"What!" exclaimed the detective. "Did he know it was there?"

"Betcher life he did! He called my attention to it, and I coughed it up like a little man, I did."

"And then——"

"We just laid our offerings on the ground in the middle of the road, as the doctor ordered—I mean the highwayman, of course—and then I told the darkness around me that we hadn't any of us a picayune left.

"'All right,' said the voice. 'Turn your backs to the machine; your faces to the light—all of you. Now, move ten paces forward.'

"Well, we did that, too. Tell you what, we were mighty obliging; and, while we stood like that, the voice reminded us that it wouldn't be at all healthy if any of us attempted to look around."

"And you didn't try it, eh?"

"Nit."

"What happened then?"

"It wasn't long before I heard somebody start my machine, and I called out:

"'What are you doing there?'

"'If you turn around, or utter another word,' came the reply, 'I'll blow the top of your head off!'

"Say! That was pleasant information, wasn't it?"

"Very. What happened then?"

"Why, I could hear them backing my machine around, and, after a little, I heard it skipping away in the opposite direction. It was soon out of hearing, and we five were standing there alone, watching that rapidly dying red light.

"'Are you there, Mr. Wizard?' I called out; but there wasn't any answer, and so, after another minute, I looked around me.

"There was still light enough to see, and by it I discovered that somebody had sneaked up behind us, and got away with the plunder that we had piled on the ground; and, after it all, they had quietly skipped away with my big sixty-horse Mercedes as well.

"Well, that is about all the story. I figured that I wasn't far from this house. I remembered that I was one of the few who knew that you had bought the place, and, although I hadn't the least idea that you were here, I thought one of your servants would take us in, and care for us, so we walked here."

"How long ago should you say it was that you were stopped?" asked the detective.

"Oh, it was somewhere about half-past one, or two o'clock—possibly a little later. We have been to the football match at New Haven, and spent the evening there after it, which accounts for our being out so late."

"Can you take me to the spot where the robbery occurred?"

"Sure thing, Nick."

"Then, if you are not too tired, I think we will go there at once. Daylight will have appeared by the time we arrive there, and I would like to examine the ground around the spot. Jackson will provide the ladies with rooms, and they can retire and rest till noon, or later, if they wish it; and Mr. Hathorne also——"

"If you don't object, I would like to go with you," said Hathorne.

"Glad to have you if you're not too tired," replied Nick. "But I think I will take you a little farther before we return here. I met the wizard myself last night——"

"What! *You* met him?" exclaimed Doremus.

"Yes. He held me up, but, for some reason, he didn't try to rob me."

"Maybe he knew who you were."

"I shouldn't wonder if he did."

"Say, Nick, I'm not a poor man, as you know, and I want to say to you right here, if you will run down that 'Wizard of the Highway' fellow, and catch him, I'll sign a blank check for you to fill out to please yourself, so long as you don't make it more than five figures. That chap has made me feel like thirty cents, and I'm not going to forgive him right away."

"We will make him feel worse than that before we are through with him," replied the detective. "Are you sure that you are not too tired to go with me?"

"Say, I wouldn't stay behind for anything."

"All right. Come ahead, then. It will soon be light, and I wish to be on the ground the moment that we can see."

"You don't expect to catch the wizard there, do you?"

"No; but I think it possible that I may find something which will enable me to catch him later on."

"Then let us go at once."

Five minutes later the ladies, as they left the table, heard the Peerless dash past the door on its way to the scene of the robbery.

CHAPTER III.

THE BANDIT OF THE FOREST.

Possibly it has not occurred to the reader to wonder why the detective's chief assistant, Chick, did not form a

part of this company; but to those who recall the working out of the case of Captain Satan, the Unknown, the reason is at once apparent.

There had been a quarrel—or something very nearly approaching one—between the detective and his chief assistant, in the prosecution of that case, and it had ended in an estrangement between them. Chick had gone to take up his abode at the Hotel Mammoth, and during an entire month the two detectives had not met to exchange a word.

May we be pardoned if we revert for a moment to that quarrel, and to the reasons for it?

The fact that Nick Carter had been led to believe that a certain young and beautiful society woman, by name Leila Loring, was the real Captain Satan, was the original cause of the misunderstanding; and the detective had no idea at the time that the young lady in question was not only already well known to Chick, but that he was deeply in love with her and she with him; in fact that their love-affair had already progressed so far that they were betrothed at the time of the prosecution of the case—and this entirely without the knowledge of Nick Carter.

It had seemed to Nick, as the case was drawing near a close, that Chick had unwarrantably betrayed his confidence, and so without words they had parted.

That the estrangement was final, nobody for a moment believed—the principals less than any others; but each felt in his own heart that until even the shadow of resentment had passed from their minds, it was better that they should remain apart.

On the morning of the same day that Nick Carter started for his country home in Connecticut, accompanied by Ten-Ichi, Patsy and Reginald Pentecost, he had received cards from the sponsors for the prospective bride, which announced the approaching marriage of Leila Loring to Chickering Carter, the same to take place at the parlors of the Hotel Mammoth, two weeks from that day; and it had been that as much as anything which had decided the detective to absent himself from the city for an indefinite time—or at least, he told himself, until immediately before the wedding, when he told himself confidentially, he would return and appear at the ceremony and the reception that was to follow it.

While the three men were driving along in the automobile—for the detective had decided not to rouse his two assistants, but to take with him only the two guests who had so unexpectedly arrived at his house—James Doremus touched upon the subject of Chick's approaching marriage, for he, too, had received cards for the wedding.

"I suppose that Chick has given up the detective business; eh?" he remarked.

"Do you?" asked Nick non-commitally.

There was silence for a moment, and then Doremus said:

"Say, Nick, there is a question I had often wanted to ask you. May I do it?"

The detective did not reply, and Doremus added:

"What is the trouble between you and Chick?"

For a full minute the detective did not reply at all; but then, very slowly, he said:

"I am subjecting Chick to a test of faith; that is all."

"A test of faith? What sort of faith? I don't in the least understand."

"It is not at all necessary that you should understand."

"Possibly not; but here is what I do see."

"Well?"

"Is is quite apparent to your friends, that you and Chick have quarreled."

"Scarcely that, Jim."

"Well, something has happened between you that is not as it should be. Chick is living at the Mammoth. He spends his days automobiling and driving, or riding horseback with his fiancée. You and he are never seen together any more; and——"

"And that is sufficient, isn't it? Now, Jim, let me tell you quite plainly, that I do not at all enjoy having people prying into my affairs. With you, it is different, for you are my own good friend, and Chick's also; so I will tell you something about the exact condition of the supposed quarrel."

"I really wish you would do so, Nick."

"It is like this: You know about the Captain Satan affair, don't you?"

"Certainly."

"You do not know, however, that circumstances pointed directly toward Leila Loring—who was even then Chick's fiancée, although I was not aware that they knew each other at all—circumstances pointed toward her as being the real Captain Satan. I had almost made up my mind that she was the criminal, and had taken Chick into my confidence, as usual.

"Now, the point of the whole thing is, that instead of telling me all that he knew about her at that time, and setting me right in regard to her and to himself as well, he asked to be excused for a time, and he went directly to her and informed her of all that I had on my mind, of all that I intended to do—and he actually remained in the house when I went to it to keep an engagement with her.

"His action, in itself, was all right. I have no fault to find with it from his standpoint; but from my own, I have a great deal. It was not that he made me feel badly, for he did not. The instant I knew how matters stood, and that I had made a mistake, I cherished no hard feelings whatever against Chick. But there was a principle involved."

"Principles be——"

"Yes. I know. It is all right from your point of view; but it is not so from mine. You must remember that Chick is a detective—that I am one."

"I'm not likely to forget that."

"The training of a detective, his manner of life, his method of looking at subjects, and the *modus operandi* behind all his acts, are totally different from the actuating motives of other men. Chick did not really offend my personal self; he offended my professional self. He did not act as a detective should have acted under the circumstances. He permitted his heart to interfere with his head; he allowed sentiment to stand in the way of judgment."

"And for that, I suppose, he must be turned down and out!" said Doremus, with fine scorn.

"For that he should be—and is being—disciplined," continued the detective calmly. "He understands the situation as well as I do. There have been no words between us on the subject, but I would be willing to wager a good deal that he knows I hold no anger in my heart against him—and that he holds none against me."

"Then you will permit me to observe that I regard you as a pair of large and elegant jackasses."

"No doubt," said Nick, laughing. "Fortunately—for us—your opinion on the subject is not final."

"But you said something a moment ago about a test of faith. Do you mind telling me what that is?"

"Yes; I do mind. I don't care to tell you what it is, just now. Our business, for the present, is to catch that 'Wizard of the Highway.' Possibly, after we have accomplished that, you will understand."

"You talk as though you expected to catch the highwayman within the next hour."

Nick looked at his watch; and then, with a quiet smile, he replied:

"Yes; it will be just about an hour."

Doremus stared.

"What the devil, do you mean?" he ejaculated.

"Exactly what I say."

"That you expect to catch 'The Wizard of the Highway' within an hour?"

"I expect to capture the parties who robbed you, early this morning, within another hour; yes. And also, I expect to see your Mercedes car and all your valuables restored to you within that length of time."

Doremus was silent for a moment, and then he laughed scornfully.

"What do you expect to do, eh?" he asked. "Pull him down out of the sky? Pick him up somewhere along the road? Find him hanging to the bushes? Hello! Where in blazes are you going? Eh?"

The detective had turned his machine abruptly into a narrow road that was overgrown with grass, and which dived deep into a wood which lined the main road on either side of them; and to reach it the automobile had jounced across a ditch where there seemed to be imminent danger of fracturing a spring—until they were safely across.

"You will find out, presently," replied the detective.

"It looks to me as if you would have to go up a tree before you get out of this, Nick."

"Possibly; or find somebody else up a tree."

"Humph! Is that where you are going to look for the wizard?"

Nick did not reply, for his entire attention was now centered upon the direction of the machine, for he was obliged to use great care in guiding it along that narrow and rough road where the trees grew so thickly that there were times when it was next to impossible to pass between them, and when the branches drooped down into their faces.

And the road wound in and out, now ascending, now descending, again skirting the edge of a ravine, and finally stopping abruptly at the foot of a huge buttonwood-tree.

"Have you noticed," asked the detective, then, still remaining quietly in his seat under the wheel, "that this is not the only automobile that has passed this way lately?"

"No; I haven't," replied Doremus.

"But I have," said Hathorne. "I have seen the tracks of big wheels in several places, since we entered the wood."

"Humph!" muttered Doremus. "I suppose you will tell me, Nick, that those tracks were made by my Mercedes, and that you have smelled them out at the first throw-out of the box; eh?"

"They were made by your Mercedes, Jim," replied the detective quietly; "but I did not smell them out. I saw them."

Doremus laughed aloud. He was plainly nervous, and he showed it in that manner.

"Where are you going to look for it?" he asked. "Up at the top of that big tree?"

"Hardly that—but it is not far from here."

"Shall we get out?"

"No. Sit where you are a moment. Wait for me. I won't be long."

"Where are you going?"

"Just back into the wood a little way."

The detective sprang from his seat and disappeared before his friend could say another word in protest; and the two men in the automobile saw him mount to the top of a hill just beyond the big tree, and disappear over the brow of it.

"Now, where in the devil do you suppose he has gone to? And what brought him to this God-forsaken spot? Eh?" asked Doremus impatiently, of his companion.

"Give it up," was the laconic reply.

'I didn't suppose that there was such an infernal forest as this one, so near to New York, did you, Jack?"

"Can't say that I did."

"He will never be able to turn the machine around in here, will he?"

"Hardly. It looks as if he would have to back out when——"

Hathorne ceased speaking suddenly, for at that instant a sharp command came to them from the dense thicket at the right; and it said, with unmistakable emphasis:

"Hands up, there! Quick, or I will shoot!

Needless to say both men shot their hands into the air instantly; and then, out from the edge of the thicket there stepped an individual who held a rifle in his hands; a rifle that was pointed directly toward them, and which covered first one and then the other, so that it seemed as if the man had only to press the trigger to kill either of them.

The hold-up man was a picturesque person, too, for he was dressed in the regulation garb of an Italian bandit. It was as if he had stepped down out of a picture, or was playing a part upon some stage. His costume was a combination of many colors; his belt bristled with weapons; a half-mask covered his face; an ostrich plume drooped from his broad-rimmed plush hat; his short, wide-lapeled coat glistened with gold and silver decorations; his leggings were studded with jewels. Altogether, he looked as if he had stepped down out of a scene at an opera, and was giving an exhibition for the benefit of the two men whose hearts his rifle threatened, and who sat there in the automobile, pale-faced and startled, with their arms extended over their heads while they awaited the further pleasure of the bandit.

CHAPTER IV.

NICK CARTER HELD FOR RANSOM.

It had often been said of James Doremus, by those who knew him best, that he was always afraid of what might happen, but never manifested the least sign of fear in the face of real danger; he proved the truth of that remark now.

"Hello! By Jove!" he called out, as soon as he had collected his wits after the first instant of surprise. "Fillipo, the bandit, in real life, by thunder."

"Ah! You know me," replied the robber calmly; but still keeping his rifle on a level with the hearts of the men in the motor car.

"You don't mean to tell me that Fillipo is your name!" exclaimed Doremus, rather aghast.

"Fillipo is my name—at present—and I am a bandit," came the reply, and the two men believed they saw the shadow of a smile flicker for an instant beneath the half-mask of the robber.

"But, I say, old chap, this isn't Italy, you know."

"No; it is America—and the State of Connecticut."

"Humph! Then what the dev—— What are you doing here?"

"Just at present I am holding you two gentlemen at bay at the point of my rifle."

"So I see."

"And in another moment I shall ask you for your valuables."

Doremus burst out laughing.

"I'm sorry for you—really I am," he replied; "but the fact is you have asked too late. We encountered one of your gentry last night—possibly it was yourself at that—and he or it, or they, didn't leave a 'soo-markee' to bestow upon the poor. We haven't either of us got a cent, or a watch—or anything."

"Ah! So you are the gentlemen who were in the big Mercedes, last night—or rather early this morning, are you?"

"We have that distinguished honor, Signor Fillipo," drawled Doremus, in his most affected tones; "and that reminds me——"

"Well?"

"You cannot possibly have any use for that automobile, you know. You cannot dispose of it. You would be caught quicker than scat; and so you might as well give it up. Don't you think so?"

"You will find it, when you return, standing at the entrance gate, to the grounds of the place where you were received before daylight this morning"

"You don't say so. Well, that's good of you. And that reminds me again——"

"What now?"

"We had a chauffeur when we came into this wood. He left us for a moment and said he would return without delay. Possibly you may have seen him; eh?"

"Do you refer to Nick Carter, the detective? The man who brought you here?" asked the bandit dryly.

Doremus started. Then he exclaimed:

"By thunder! You know him?"

"Certainly."

"And you have seen him?"

"But a few moments ago."

"Where is he? What has become of him. Where——"

"One question at a time, signors. He is at this moment my prisoner."

"Eh? What's that? Nick Carter your prisoner?"

The bandit bowed in the affirmative.

Doremus dropped his arms in his astonishment, but the stern voice of the bandit called him to attention again.

"Hands up!" he said coldly. "Although I talk with you and chaff with you, I am in no mood for foolery. If you do not obey me, I will shoot you."

"Oh, say, what's the use of holding our hands up in this manner? There isn't a weapon of any kind in the outfit."

"Is that true?"

"Literally true."

"You aren't armed?"

"No. Not even with a penknife. It happened to have a silver handle, and I left it with the other things, in the middle of the road, this morning."

"Very well. You may each lower your arms, in that case. The prisoner said that you had neither arms nor valuables about you, but I thought it as well to ascertain for myself."

"Very polite of you, I'm sure. Look here, Mr. Filipo."

"Well?"

"What are you going to do with Nick Carter; eh? Now that you've got him; eh?"

Instead of replying at once, the bandit said:

"I am told that your name is Doremus; no?"

"Yes."

"And that you are a rich man; no?"

"That seems to be a general opinion. There are times when I don't think so myself, but——"

"You at least carry a large bank-account."

"Yes. Rather."

"You have just asked me what I purpose doing with Nick Carter, I believe."

"Yes; I asked you that."

"Then listen and I will tell you. He is a prisoner in my hands."

"You have already told me that."

"At this moment, he is in charge of several of my men, and is on his way to one of our safe hiding-places. At present he is bound and gagged, so that he cannot cry out for aid; but after a little the gag will be removed, for he will have been taken to a spot from whence the explosion of a cannon could not be overheard."

"Humph!" muttered Doremus.

"There, in a safe retreat from which there is no possibility of his escaping, or that any of his friends can find him, he will be detained. Do you understand that, Mr. Doremus?"

"I understood what you said, perfectly."

"Do you see that sycamore-tree, there? A tree which you call the buttonwood?"

"Quite plainly."

"If, exactly one week from to-day, at this hour, you do not come here to this spot alone—*alone*, mind you—and place beneath that tree the sum of ten thousand dollars in gold, Nick Carter's right ear will be severed from his head, and sent to you at your New York address, through the mails."

"Great heavens, man, we are not living in the middle ages!"

"No; but we are just now in the middle of a dense forest. Now listen to me while I finish what I have to say."

"Go on, curse you!"

"That isn't polite; but I will take no notice. You understand the date I gave you—and the duty you are to perform?"

"Yes."

"One week from that day—which will be two weeks from to-day—you will appear again, and at the same hour, alone, and deposit a second ten thousand dollars in gold——"

"The devil I will!"

"——or the detective's *left* ear will be forwarded to you in the manner described. One week later than that—which will be three weeks from to-day——"

"Say! How long is this thing to be kept up, mister?"

"——you will appear here at the same hour, and alone, and deposit a third ten thousand dollars in gold, or the index finger of the detective's right hand will be forwarded to you in the manner already described. Then, still a week later than that——"

"Say! What's the use of drawing the thing out for that length of time. What's the matter with doing——"

"You will be good enough, signor, to hear me to the end without interruption."

"Oh, well! Fire away. We've got all day."

"You should thank your stars that I do not keep *you* here for ransom as well as the detective."

"Possibly I do. But go ahead with your comic opera."

"You will discover that it is a tragedy instead of a comic opera, if you do not carry out the conditions I impose upon you."

"Well?"

"The fourth week, this day and hour, you will appear here again and alone, and will bring a fourth ten thousand dollars in gold, or the index finger of the detective's left hand will go to you. After that, you will appear the fifth week, this day and hour, with a like amount, or Nick Carter will lose another finger. That will make in all that you have paid, the sum of fifty thousand dollars in gold, will it not?"

"That's the way I figure it."

"The sixth week——"

"What! Are there more of them?"

"Silence. The sixth week you will bring the sum of *fifty* thousand dollars in gold——"

"Great jingo, man!"

"Or the detective will lose his head, which will be sent to you by express; and the seventh week, at the same day and hour, if you will come here, and if you have thoroughly complied with all my demands, you will find Nick Carter here awaiting you. He will be tied to that tree in such a manner that he cannot escape, but you will be permitted to liberate him. If you do not come alone, or if you are accompanied, he will be shot by a man who will be concealed near here, notwithstanding the money you have already paid. Do you understand now, and thoroughly, the terms under which alone Nick Carter can regain his liberty?"

"You have made it plain enough. But what is the matter with my bringing the whole hundred thousand here to-morrow, and your letting him go at once?"

"Because, for one thing, such is not my pleasure. For another, I have reasons for desiring these seven weeks of liberty from pursuit. During them I can ply my trade and enrich myself still more—and besides, I have not yet finished with my conditions."

"What! Are there more of them?"

"One more, only."

"What is it?"

"If you dare to set the police on my track, or to tell them or anybody of the times and the place where you are to leave the gold, or of the amounts you are to pay, Nick Carter will be killed at once, and he will never be seen again, alive. That is all. You may go, now. You will have to back your machine from this place——"

"But stay——!"

"Well?"

"His assistants will have to know. Two of them are at his house now, and——"

Again that ghost of a smile flitted across the partly concealed lips of the bandit.

"Those two assistants at the house must remain idle. They must do nothing, or their chief's life will pay the penalty. They are in the same predicament with yourself and the man who sits in the tonneau behind you now."

The bandit waved his hand and took a step backward toward the thicket; but Doremus called out to him.

"There is another," he began. "There is Chi——"

He stopped short, for a wild and weird plan came to him in that instant like an inspiration.

"Well?" said the bandit.

"Nothing. Go to the devil!"

The bandit raised his right hand and pointed toward the base of the huge tree.

"*Remember!*" he said coldly; and with another gesture, he turned away and disappeared.

"Of all the infernal, confounded, cold-blooded scoundrels!" muttered Doremus; and grinding his teeth savagely together, he applied the power and began backing the automobile out of the woods.

CHAPTER V.

A PURPOSE BEHIND THE MYSTERY.

It was tedious work, getting out of the woods with the big machine, for Doremus was compelled to go backward more than half the distance to the road before he could turn about.

The task was accomplished at last, however, and the two men were soon flying along the road toward Nick Carter's country home.

Oddly enough both were silent; each seemed to be occupied with his own thoughts—and both were thinking of the strange thing that had happened that morning.

Nick Carter had taken them out.

They had started with their banners flying, metaphorically, in the breezes—and they were returning with their feathers dragging in the dust, like a wet hen.

Suddenly Doremus brought the Peerless to a stop.

"I've a good notion to go back there!" he growled.

"Don't make an ass of yourself," replied Hathorne glumly.

"All the same——"

"All the same the bandit chief would only hand you out one of Nick Carter's ears, and say to you, 'Call again, signor.' How would you like that?"

Doremus started the machine on again; but presently, he remarked:

"I'm blowed if the thing seems real, Jack. Does it to you?"

"Mighty real, if anybody should ask you."

"It was too operatic; too melodramatic; too opera bouffe."

"Noses, and fingers, and ears, and things thrown in, Jim?"

"Oh, da—— Say! Do you suppose the fellow meant all he said?"

"It sounded that way to me."

"And that his name was really Fillipo? Eh?"

"I don't see why it shouldn't be. Philip is quite as common in Italian as it is in English. They spell it differently, that is all."

"It is rather odd, isn't it, that I should have mentioned that very name in my conversation with Nick when I was telling him about that other hold-up?"

"Yes; I suppose so."

"Held up twice within a dozen hours. I think we hold the record, Jack."

"It isn't an enviable one."

"Oh, I don't know. It has its attractions."

"I suppose you are now referring to the ease with which you are to rid yourself of a cold hundred thousand dollars?"

"Eh? By Jove! I had totally forgotten that part of it."

"It is quite a sum to pay out—in gold, isn't it? Even for you?"

"Oh, yes. Still, confound it all, I've got enough. I won't particularly miss it, I suppose; and I would pay out a whole lot more than that rather than have Nick Carter come to grief. The only part of the whole thing that gets the best of me is that the bandit and his men succeeded in capturing Nick at all. We didn't hear a struggle or a sound of any kind; at least I did not. Did you?"

"No."

"Nick Carter isn't one to give up beaten without a struggle."

"They probably saw us coming. One of their sentinels told the chief of our approach. After that, all they had to do was to lie in wait, and when Carter got out of the car and went forward alone, they had only to throw something over him, and then bind him at their leisure. I suppose it would all look very simple if only we had seen it done. What are you going to do about paying the money?"

"Precisely as I was told to do."

"Take the money there, in gold, to that tree?"

"Sure"

"And alone?"

"I've got to do that or it wouldn't be any good to take it at all."

"And what about reporting the affair to those two assistants of Carter's, up at the house where we went after the first hold-up?"

"I'm going to do as I was told, I tell you."

"Suppose those two start out on their own hooks to rescue their chief."

"They won't. I'll tell them what was said. I'll tell them that I propose to pay the money as I was ordered to do, and that they've got to let me do it. If after it is all paid, and Nick Carter is at liberty again, they choose to take the trail of the bandit and see if they can catch him—that's their affair. Besides——"

"Besides what?"

"That is all."

"You were about to say something more."

"So I was; but I changed my mind."

"Who is this other assistant of Carter's? The one he has quarreled with?"

"Do you mean Chick?"

"Yes."

"He is one of the best ever."

"Why not go to him?"

"Perhaps I will. I haven't had time to think much about it yet."

"If he is any kind of a man at all, he would grab at this chance to vindicate himself with the detective. He would take the trail at once, and——"

"And get Nick Carter's ears cut off; eh?"

Hathorne shrugged his shoulders.

"I didn't take much stock in those threats," he said. "That sort of thing isn't done within a few miles of New York City, in the year nineteen hundred and five, is it?"

"Shut up, Jack. I want to think," was the rather irrelevant response to the question; and after that the two rode on in silence until at last they came in sight of the great gate which opened upon Nick's private grounds.

"Hello!" exclaimed Doremus, then. "Look yonder!" and he pointed directly ahead.

"What do you see?" asked his companion.

"My Mercedes. Don't you see it? There, by the side of the road, just beyond that fringe of shrubbery?"

"Yes. Sure."

"There is a man there with it, too, isn't there? Hello! He is taking French leave, now that he has seen us. Hi, there! Hi! Hi!"

But the man did not stop. If he heard the call at all, he paid no heed to it.

As soon as the Peerless came into sight, he had leaped the stone wall into the wooded park of the estate, and he was already out of sight among the trees.

"That was one of the bandits—the fellow who brought the machine here, doubtless," said Doremus, as he brought Nick's automobile to a stop close beside his own, which had been drawn up at the side of the road. "I don't suppose I ought to kick, since I have got my machine back again. Hello! What's that?"

"What's what?"

But Doremus did not answer at once. He was already out of the Peerless, and had leaped into the Mercedes, and from the tonneau he now raised a large bundle which he held ostentatiously where his companion could see it.

"What is it?" asked Hathorne.

"I don't know. It is addressed to me, whatever it is."

With his knife he cut the strings which held the wrappings around the bundle, and in a moment had revealed the contents.

"I'll be eternally confounded if 'The Wizard of the Highway,' or Mr. Fillipo—whatever he pleases to call himself—hasn't been and given back the whole blessed swag that he took away from us this morning, Jack—money and all!" he exclaimed.

"Eh? What's that?"

"It is all here. Every bit of it."

"The money, too, did you say?"

"Yep."

"What do you suppose it all means?"

"Wait. Here's a note with it. Listen."

"I'm listening."

"'I have returned these articles and the money I took from you this morning, in order that you may understand that I am one who keeps his word. My promises, every one of them, will be kept to the letter. See to it that you do not fail in yours,'" he read aloud. "Now what do you think of that?"

"It sounds very definite, at least. How is it signed?"

"It isn't signed at all."

"Well, you had better run your own machine up to the house. I will take care of this one. The girls and your wife won't be at all sorry to get back their treasures."

"Look here, Jack, how in the world are we going to tell them this whole story and expect them to keep it a secret?"

"Why, you've got to make a clean breast of the whole thing and pledge them to secrecy, that's all."

"Do you suppose for a moment that a woman will be able to keep a secret like that?"

Hathorne shrugged his shoulders, and they arrived in front of the door of the house.

"You let me do all the talking," said Doremus. "You keep as mum as an oyster. Just shake your head when they ask you questions. I'll take Patsy and Ten-Ichi aside, and tell them the story just as I know it, and after that, I'll tell the girls."

And so, in reply to the numerous questions as to how he had found his own machine, where Nick was, what had happened since they went away, and so forth, Doremus only shook his head; but he motioned to the two assistants, and they followed him into the house.

In the library, in as few words as possible, he related all that had occurred during that remarkable encounter in the woods.

To Doremus' infinite surprise, and rather to his disgust as well, neither of the assistants did what he expected them to do. Neither of them begged of him permission to go at once in search of their chief; and both seemed to acquiesce in the idea that it would be far better to carry out the instructions of the bandit to the letter.

"I suppose you are quite willing to pay the money, Mr. Doremus?" said Patsy. "You know that the chief will make it good to you as soon as he is free again."

"Oh, yes. I know that."

"And as for us, Ten-Ichi, I think we had better remain right here where we are until those seven weeks are past; don't you?"

"By all means," replied Ten-Ichi; and Doremus looked at them in amazement, and in silence.

But after a moment, he exploded:

"Do you know what I think of you two chaps?" he demanded. "But no! I won't tell you. Only I will say this much; if Nick Carter were here where you are, and you two were there where he is, and somebody was threatening to cut off your ears and your noses, he would pull the stars down out of the sky but what he'd have you out of it. I'll bid you good day, Masters Patsy and Ten-Ichi. You're too easy-going to suit my taste—and I have made up my mind that, ears or no ears, I'm going to find Chick and tell him about it."

The two assistants exchanged glances, and the suspicion of a smile appeared for an instant on Patsy' face; but it was gone instantly; nor did Doremus notice it, for he had turned, and was already stalking from the room.

If he could have looked back for a moment after he closed the door, he would have seen Patsy collapse upon the lounge in the throes of agony—or suppressed mirth, while Ten-Ichi muttered:

"Shut up, you fool, can't you? What do you suppose the chief would say if he should see you now?"

"Say? What would he say? He would say that the fish had swallowed the bait, hook, line, bob, and sinker. That's what he would say—and he'd be right at that."

By all of which the reader will guess that there was somewhere a deep and dark purpose behind the mysterious capture of Nick Carter, by "The Wizard of the Highway."

CHAPTER VI.

CHICK'S DILEMMA.

It was half-past four o'clock in the afternoon of the same day, when James Doremus sent his card to Chick, at the Hotel Mammoth, and waited impatiently the return of the hall boy who had taken it.

But he came at last, and the young millionaire was conducted to the suite of rooms that Chick was temporarily occupying.

"How are you, Chick?" he said as he entered. "I'm jolly glad to find you in."

"And I am glad that I happened to be in—in fact I was on the point of going out, just because time was hanging heavily on my hands, so you are twice welcome."

"Stand up here a minute, Chick, beside me, in front of this mirror; will you?"

"What for? What is the matter with you now?"

"Mmmm! We are about the same height! about the same build, too. You may be a trifle heavier, but not much. Yep! I think you can do it."

"Say, Jim, what is the matter? Have you been sitting up too late nights, or drinking absinthe—or what?"

"Oh, I've got an idea, that's all."

"What is it?"

"Well, it is part of a story I've got to tell you first. It is something about Nick."

"About Nick?"

Chick was all attention at once, and as he dropped into a chair, he leaned forward rather eagerly, waiting for the story.

"Nick is in danger," said Doremus abruptly. "He is in great peril."

Chick bounded to his feet.

"And he sent you to me?" he demanded.

"No; I came of my own accord;" and then, as Chick subsided into the chair again, he added:

"Not but what he would have been glad to send me to you if he could have done so, but the fact is, he was bound and gagged at the time——"

"Bound and gagged! What do you mean?"

"At least that is what the bandit said. You see, I was robbed last night, by 'The Wizard of the Highway,' and——"

"So that was you, eh?"

"I? What do you mean?"

"I saw something in the paper this morning about 'The Wizard of the Highway' having got in his fine work

last night—only your name wasn't mentioned. It was——"

"Where was that, Chick?"

"Over in Jersey. Somewhere near Englewood."

"Well, that wasn't *my* wizard! You can put that in your pipe and smoke it. And mine was the real thing, too. That chap over in Jersey is an imitation, if anybody should ask you. And besides, any chap that is sandy enough to capture Nick Carter, and hold him a prisoner for ransom, to the tune of a cold hundred thousand dollars, is no joke."

Chick left his chair and crossed the room until he stood directly in front of his guest. Then, placing his hands on Doremus' shoulders, he said:

"Now, Jim, I want you to start fair. Begin at the beginning and tell me all that you have to say, and leave nothing out. I won't interrupt. Now, go ahead."

And so the story was told from beginning to end.

Doremus left nothing out. He began at the moment when he and his party were held up, told how everything had been taken from them, and how they had finally walked to Nick's country home only to find that he was there, having arrived during the night himself, and how he had also had an encounter with the highwayman.

He told of their reception by Nick, and of their early morning start in search of the highwayman, or rather of clews which might lead to his apprehension.

"Nick knew that the wizard had stolen my automobile," he went on, "and while we were on our way to the scene of the robbery, he found where a big-tired machine had turned off into a narrow road which led through a wood. He followed it, and with the result that after awhile we brought up against a tree and could go no farther.

"There Nick got out, saying that he would return in a few moments; and after he left us, Hathorne and I sat there talking when suddenly a regular out-and-out opera bouffe bandit appeared on the scene."

He then went on to tell how they had been ordered to put up their hands, and to detail the conversation that had ensued in regard to Nick.

"Now, Chick," he said in conclusion, "the thing looks absurd, as I tell it—but it isn't absurd, not by several mill-sites. That bandit fellow meant what he said. He wants that money, and he is going to get it; at least a good part of it, for I am just as certain that he will torture Nick if I don't keep my word with him, as I am sure that I am seated here in your rooms."

"It hardly seems——"

"There now! I know it doesn't. Neither does it seem reasonable that at this day and date a few measly Italians would dare to send a note to a citizen of the city, and demand money, and then kill the man or blow him up with dynamite if he doesn't pay it. But that very thing is done every day, right inside this crowded city—and I don't see why it isn't just as likely that one of their bandits should come over here to ply his trade, as that the Black Hand should do it."

"Perhaps you are right," mused Chick.

"Right! Confound it! Didn't I see the fellow? Didn't I hear him talk? Didn't I see the muzzle of his gun and didn't it look as big as a barrel to me? And didn't I see his cold-blooded grin when he told what he would do if I didn't cough up the cash, at the time and place and after the manner he directed?"

"And you are willing to supply this money?"

"Willing? Of course I'm willing."

"And take it there just as you were told to do?"

"Ah! Now you're talking. That is exactly what I came here to see you about."

"What do you mean?"

"That is why I made you stand with me in front of the mirror when I first entered the room."

"I don't exactly catch on, Jim."

"We are about the same height, size, and build, aren't we, Chick?"

"Yes; nearly so."

"Well, I know that you sometimes make up to look so much like Nick that only you and he can tell the difference. I know that you have personated him many times when he has been absent from the city, but wished people to believe that he was still here."

"That is quite true."

"What's the matter with personating me? Eh?"

"Oh! I see."

"Can you do it?"

"Yes. Easily."

"Will you do it? You see, Chick, maybe if you should go there to pay that money yourself, you would catch onto something that I would never see in a thousand years. One week from to-day, in the morning about six, or between six and seven o'clock, I have got to place ten thousand dollars in gold at the foot of that tree. Now, my idea is that you shall disguise yourself so that all the world who sees you will think that you are James Doremus, and that you take the money there yourself, while I remain in hiding here in the city until your return. Don't you think it a good idea?"

"Excellent."

"Will you do it?"

"Certainly I will do it."

"I will have the money ready. In the meantime, I will take you out along that road in my machine, so that I can show you exactly where the old wood road is located. Once on that, you cannot miss the tree where you are to leave the money, for it is the only sycamore in those woods, that I saw."

"Yes," said Chick musingly, "it is a good plan."

"You see, Chick, the idea is this. You may not get a chance to do anything—and then again you may."

"Exactly."

"At all events, the bandit, who will doubtless be there waiting for you, will probably have something more to say—and the whole idea is that by being there yourself, it is more than likely that you will get onto something which will make it possible for you to catch him after we get Nick out of his clutches."

"You are right, Jim. I think it is all a good idea."

"And, in the meantime, you must act as if you knew nothing at all about it; or, knowing, that you are not concerned about it."

"I understand."

"Nick is in a bad pickle. There is no mistake about that."

"There doesn't seem to be."

"And the wizard of the road who has got him in his power is killing two birds with one stone."

"Precisely."

"He is holding Nick as a hostage against pursuit, so that he can continue his robberies without being molested by Nick Carter or any of his assistants, for a few weeks, and at the same time he is picking up a hundred thousand dollars in gold."

"It is almost incredible," said Chick.

"I know it is. Yesterday, I would no more have believed it than I would have believed that I would meet Robin Hood in person, holding up people along the Bowery. All the same, the fellow is there; he is an Italian, without doubt; he speaks very good English, and he is as cool, as polite, and as determined as the devil himself."

"A week from to-day, you say. Wednesday."

"Yes. Between six and seven in the morning."

"Then I must meet you at your house the Tuesday evening preceding it."

"Sure. And I will have the gold ready. Then you will take my Mercedes and go to attend to the business."

"And this must be kept up every week for seven weeks?"

"Yes. Five times, you take ten thousand dollars with you on each trip. The sixth time you take fifty thousand, and the seventh time you take nothing; only the bandit promises that you will find Nick, safe and sound, tied to the tree."

"I am to be married two weeks from to-day, at ten o'clock in the morning," said Chick, very quietly. "The cards are already out."

"At ten o'clock? Hum! That will be rather close as to time, won't it?"

"I am afraid it will."

"You might make it, though. You could be there on the ground at six, precisely, and leave the money. In that case you would have plenty of time to get back here before ten."

"Yes. In case I was not detained—and besides, I was going away for a month. This thing has to be met every week."

"Oh, well, look here; I can go myself, those other——"

"No; you cannot! Excuse me. It is my duty to do that now. I see it very plainly."

"Well, anyhow, there is nothing to interfere with your trip to the woods the first time. Your marriage doesn't come off for another week, does it?"

"No."

"Well, perhaps in the meantime, you will think out a way to make everything fit."

Doremus left his chair and moved toward the door, and Chick rose and followed him.

"There is only one thing that will fit," he said, in a low tone, but very firmly. "Nick is in trouble. I suspect that this is as much a scheme of vengeance against him as anything else; and whatever it is, I must see it through."

"That's the way to talk, Chick."

"Yes; and it's the way to act, too!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE SCENT OF A PLOT TO MURDER.

It was late in the afternoon of the day following, when Doremus again appeared at Chick's rooms at the Mammoth.

"After I left you yesterday," he said, as he helped himself to a chair, "I remembered a remark you made about a hold-up that occurred over in Jersey, near Englewood, and—well, I have been looking it up."

"Oh! Have you? What about it?" asked Chick.

"It strikes me, Chick, that there is something mighty odd about it."

"How so?"

"Well, look here! Nick told me that somewhere about midnight, that night, he met 'The Wizard of the Highway' himself. The fellow had something that resembled a rock, only it was painted on canvas, stretched across the road. When Nick brought his machine to a stop, thinking that he was about to collide with the rock of ages, or something like it, the fiend off in the darkness, who had set the trap for him, set up an unearthly laughing. Nick fired at the sound, and immediately the laughter came from the opposite side of the road. He fired at that also, and then from every point around him there came a perfect chorus of laughter."

"What has all that got to do with——"

"Wait. I'm not through yet."

"Go ahead."

"It was the wizard all right, that stopped Nick—or at least the parties who did stop him adopted the same tactics as those employed by the wizard."

"That is true enough."

"Only there was no attempt made to rob Nick Carter."

"Probably they knew who he was."

"That is precisely what Nick said about it himself. Well, now! About an hour and a half or two hours later that same night, I, with my friends, was held up—also by the wizard, if we are to recognize him by his methods—within about three miles of the place where Nick was stopped."

"Yes."

"My party had the wild, screeching laughter for entertainment—and we were also robbed."

"Yes."

"Now, all that happened across the State line into Connecticut, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, according to the accounts I have read, and the story I have heard from the parties concerned, the hold-up over in Jersey, near Englewood, was precisely the same, *only* that over there, the wizard had a heap of real rubbish piled in the road, and would have ditched the automobile if it hadn't stopped. But there was the wild and discordant laughter, and all the general surroundings which we recognize as the work of the wizard."

"Well?"

"It was Maurice Duvall, his brother, and their wives who were held up and robbed. They were forced to get out of the automobile and to pile their valuables in a heap in the middle of the road, as my party was, and after that they were permitted to climb back into the machine and continue on their way—and all this time they did not see a man or the sign of a man. I have seen and talked with Maurice this morning, and I know."

"But what are you getting at, Jim? What has all this to do with our affair?"

"It has this to do with it: *Maurice Duvall was held up over in Jersey, and I with my friends was held up in Connecticut, within fifteen minutes of the same time; and the two hold-ups were apparently conducted by the same outfit.* There is something rotten in the State of Denmark, Chick. There is a nigger in the fence somewhere."

"It is rather odd. I had not thought of all that before."

"Well, I had. It struck me yesterday, when your first idea was that I was the victim of the Jersey affair. You had not yet heard about the other one, you see."

"No."

"Well, what do you think about it?"

"What do you?"

"I don't know. Are there two wizards of the highway? Eh?"

"It is possible that the highwayman has a sufficient following so that he divides his forces," suggested Chick; "and it might be a part of his plans to perpetrate two affairs at the same time, but in widely different sections, in order to lead the police astray."

"Yes. I have thought of that; but it don't seem to satisfy me."

"What *is* your idea?"

"Why, this: I don't believe that this fellow over in Connecticut is the real wizard. I think he is the imitation, and the other one is the real thing."

"Why do you think that?"

"Duvall tells me that although he could not see any of the men who held them up, he knows that they were ruffians of the first water. They called out to them hoarsely many times; they sent bullets whizzing over the heads of the people in the automobile, and they otherwise comported themselves—well, as one might expect them to do."

"While your robber was entirely of a different species, eh?"

"Yes; he was the gentleman all over. There wasn't but one voice spoke to us the whole time—and that sounded like the voice of a gentleman, too."

"Well, that doesn't count for much, does it?"

"But you forget that he took the trouble to return my automobile, and also to give back the money and the valuables he had taken from us."

"There is something rather odd about that."

"*Odd!* I should say there is Have you any idea how much swag he got from us in that one haul?"

"You have not told me yet."

"Almost five thousand dollars in money; five watches that are worth two thousand more; rings and other jewelry that would make the sum total mount up to precious near ten thousand; and besides all that, an automobile for which I paid eight thousand five hundred, less than a month ago. Now, he gave the whole business back again."

"We can only conclude," said Chick, after a moment of meditation, "that he is looking for bigger game."

"Bigger game! Gee whiz! Isn't it big enough game to swipe between fifteen and twenty thousand at one hold-up?"

"It would seem so."

"Well, Chick, there is the problem for you. I can see only one explanation out of it."

"What is that?"

"Why, the fellow wanted me to do just what I did do. He wanted me to go to Nick Carter's house, and to set the detective on his track; and he probably purposely left a clear track for Nick to follow, so that he would fall into the trap."

"You mean that all his operations of that night was a plan to get Nick Carter into his power."

"Yes. I mean that, and more."

"What more?"

"This: It is my belief that the robber—whether he is the real wizard or not—means to keep me going there with the gold, to that confounded tree, until I have taken

the whole hundred thousand, and—do you remember that after that is all paid we have got to wait another entire week before he is to deliver Nick over to us?"

"Yes."

"That is *his* plan. The robber's plan."

"Yes."

"And that gives him a whole week, after the money is all paid, to light out; to make his escape; to leave the country; to pull up stakes and flit, leaving no trace whatever behind him that there is any chance of following. Are you onto that?"

"Perfectly well."

"Well, my idea is this. I think that he means to leave Nick Carter there, at the end of the seventh week, all right, and tied to a tree; but I think that we will find that he is tied to it *by his neck, and from a limb that is a good many feet from the ground.* That is what his plan means."

"Great Heaven! Do you mean that he intends to hang Nick Carter?"

"That is the way it looks to me. I believe, at all events, that if we wait till the end of the seventh week, we will find Nick Carter's dead body awaiting us when we go there."

Chick started from his chair and took several turns up and down the room; but after a little he resumed his seat and remarked, apparently with calmness:

"Jim, I think you are right."

"So do I."

"This fellow whom you met is not the wizard."

"No."

"The wizard was over in Jersey that night."

"Yes."

"This man, who told you that his name was Fillipo, is merely some inveterate enemy of Nick Carter, who has planned this method to get the detective into his power."

"Now you are talking sense, Chick."

"And he is just giving you a song and dance about the whole thing, while as a matter of fact it is more than likely that he has already murdered Nick."

"I don't know that such a thing is more than likely; but it is not improbable."

Chick was silent again for several moments; but presently he asked suddenly:

"Where is your machine, Jim?"

"Down at the door."

"What have you got on hand to do right now, that——"

"Not a thing on earth."

"We have got about three hours of daylight left to us."

"Yes."

"I think I will ask you to take me at once in your machine, to the spot where that road enters the woods; to the place where you left the main road just before Nick was captured."

"Get your hat, then. Come on."

"Who is here with you, in the machine?"

"Not a soul. I came alone, thinking that you might decide to act to-day, without waiting for the week to pass."

"How quick can you drive the machine out there?"

"In less than two hours. I could do it in less than an hour if I had a clear road, and there weren't any speed restrictions along the way."

"But as it is you can do it inside of two hours, eh?"

"Easily."

Within five minutes they were both in the big machine, and had started toward the nothern boundary of the city, as rapidly as they dared to go without the danger of being stopped by the police.

When they reached the country roads they made better time, and in one hour and forty minutes from the time of their start, Doremus announced:

"The place where the road goes into the wood is less than half a mile ahead of us now."

"Good. When you get there, tell me of it; but do not slacken your speed."

"No? Why?"

"Take me about a mile beyond it. After that, slow up and let me out. I will tell you where to do it—when I find a place along the road that suits me."

"And what shall I do after that?"

"You? Keep on to the next turn in the road, and return to the city by another route."

"And leave you here alone?"

"Yes; that is what I want you to do."

"But—you may need me with you, old fellow."

"No; I will work better alone. This is a matter wherein I have got to bring into play all the skill of woodcraft and of a scout that I learned when I lived in Nevada. I will be better alone on this lay, Jim."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE YOUNG ASSISTANT'S TRANSFORMATION.

Less than half-a-mile beyond the wood road already referred to, Chick signaled for Doremus to stop. It was at a spot where the highway crossed a deep ravine and Chick believed that he saw in the lonely place below the bridge just the locality he wished to find.

"I will leave you here," he said, leaping to the ground, and taking with him a well-packed traveling-bag.

"And I am to return to the city?" asked Doremus.

"Yes."

"Suppose you should not show up in time for next Wednesday?"

"Then, in that case, you will carry out your original plan."

"You mean that in that case I am to take the ten thousand to the buttonwood-tree?"

"Yes; but you will see me before that time."

"I hope so."

"There is one thing that I wish you to do for me as soon as you are back in the city."

"What is that?"

"I did not take the time to call upon Miss Loring and tell here where I was going. I wish you to go to her house, and tell her the entire story, just as you have told it to me."

"You do?"

"Yes; everything. Then tell her where I am now, and what I am trying to do. That is all. I will communicate with her—and with you also—as soon as it is possible to do so, or as soon as I have anything to tell."

"All right. I suppose you know that Patsy and Ten-Ichi are at the country place? Eh?"

"Yes; but I shall work entirely alone in this matter."

"Good luck to you, Chick."

"All right. Thank you. Go ahead, now."

The automobile dashed away, and as it did so, Chick leaped from the bridge to a space of smooth and soft ground beneath it, and then began to follow down the steep sides of the ravine toward the bottom.

He went so rapidly that if anybody had been watching him from the roadway, he would have been lost sight of in a moment.

In the interior of the State of New York, or in the highlands of Scotland, the place in which Chick now found himself would have been called a glen. Cliff of overhanging rock loomed above him on either side as he descended, and a foaming stream of water dashed through the shady bottom of the cleft in the hills.

But the young detective did not stop to study the scenery.

Instead, he made his way rapidly forward and downward, until he had traveled a half-mile or more from the starting-place, and at last reached a spot which seemed to answer his requirements.

It was a wide, oval-shaped place in the glen, where the stream divided and created an island, and this in turn was covered by a thick growth of trees.

Crossing one branch of the stream, Chick presently found a cleared place in the very center of the island, and here he put down his bag and opened it.

And now he worked with a system, and rapidly.

First he removed such things as he thought he would require, and placed them on the ground beside the bag, and then he deliberately disrobed until he stood there in the shelter of the trees, as naked as he was born.

Next, he unscrewed the lid of a tin can, and with a camel's-hair brush, made wide for the purpose, he began painting his body with the contents of the can, until, after a few moments occupied in this manner, he had colored his skin to a swarthy hue, from his head to his toes.

That done, he began to dress, selecting clothing from the kit he had brought there, so that when, at last, he was entirely clothed, he did not wear a garment that had been on his person at the time he left the automobile.

His next act was to set up a mirror against the trunk of one of the trees, and after that he took painstaking care in affixing a short-cropped and bristling mustache to his upper lip, and a similar tuft of hair just beneath the droop of the lower one; and he worked with such skill and care that, after the operation was finished, and the sticking process had thoroughly dried, one might have seized either the mustache or the dependence and pulled, without disturbing them.

Next, with merciless abandon, he sheared off the hair of his head until it was cropped almost as closely as a convict's, and after covering his pate with a prepared paste, he adjusted a wig that matched the mustache; and when that had dried in place, he pulled lustily upon it to satisfy himself that it was fast—as indeed it was.

And now he arranged a pair of small, 32-caliber revolvers in the rather wide sleeves of the brown corduroy coat, fastening them there with spiral springs, after the manner that we have seen Nick Carter employ many times—and indeed Chick was almost as expert in the use of this arrangement as the detective himself.

Next, he tucked a murderous-looking dagger away out of sight behind the waistband of his breeches—for this garment only came to his knees and was pieced out with leather leggings—and he put other revolvers into either hip pocket; weapons of larger caliber, too.

And now, having arranged a wide, flowing collar and adjusted a flaming red tie, he drew a vizored cap well down over his eyes and looked into the mirror again.

"Even Nick Carter wouldn't know me now," was the comment he made.

And indeed it is extremely doubtful if the detective *would* have recognized him then, for the alteration in his appearance and manner was so absolute that it defied detection.

Was he Italian? Was he Spanish? What was he?

It would have been extremely difficult to have answered any of those questions; but as he was about to turn away, he stopped, and did one thing more.

He took a second can of stain from the bag and presently he had manufactured a long, ugly-looking scar which descended from the bridge of his nose across the left cheek so that it just escaped the end of the mustache, and so continued down to the chin.

"That is better," he mused, studying it. "Now it is dead certain that even Nick would not recognize me—and I don't wish him to do so, if I have the good fortune to penetrate to the spot where he is held a prisoner, and he should happen to see me without a word of warning."

His next act was to pack the things he had no use for, into the bag again; and this, when filled and closed and locked, he buried in a hole that he dug behind some

bushes, finally covering the whole with twigs and leaves and refuse, from the place about him, until there remained not the slightest evidence that the ground had been disturbed.

"We made such good time that I have still almost an hour before it will be dark," he mused, as he slowly left the island and began to mount through the ravine again, toward the bridge where he had parted with Doremus.

But he did not pause there, when he reached it, but turned to the left and walked rapidly toward the entrance to the wood by the road where Nick had been attacked and captured.

When he arrived there, he paused and examined the ground; and he noticed, at once, the marks that had been made there by the huge tires of the automobile.

But he noticed another thing, also—there were only *two* of these tracks.

"That is odd," he muttered. "There are only two tracks here, and those were made by the Peerless, when Nick came here with Doremus and Hathorne. One of them was made going in, and the other when the machine came out, after Nick had been captured. It does not appear here that another machine had entered by this road in advance of them, at all. Humph!"

He mused again for several moments, and then continued:

"I wonder what could have induced Nick to turn into this road at all, at the time he did? There was not a track here, then. There was not a sign that anybody had passed before him by this road, and therefore, he could not have seen one. Now, why in the world did he choose to turn the machine through here?"

He meditated for a long time, but he could find no answer to this very pertinent question, and after a little he gave it up and started toward the heart of the wood.

He walked almost a mile before he came to the tree—the big sycamore, which he instantly recognized from the description of it he had received from Doremus—and there he stopped.

There was still plenty of light, and right here it happened that the woods were not as thick and the foliage was not as heavy as it was around him, and so he had no difficulty in making a study of the ground.

He could see very plainly where the machine had come to a stop.

He knew, from the story that had been told him, that neither Doremus nor Hathorne had gotten out of the automobile during that remarkable interview with the bandit, and therefore had no difficulty in discovering the spot where Nck Carter had leaped from the machine to the ground.

The soil was soft and easily marked, and the imprint of Nick's heels where he alighted was plainly visible.

And so, also, were the steps taken by the detective, after he leaped to the ground.

They might not have been visible to unpractised eyes; but it must not be forgotten that nearly all Chick's boyhood had been passed where he had learned to read the signs of a trail through a forest or across a plain, as readily as a student reads the pages of a book.

The last of the Mohicans, as depicted by Fennimore Cooper, could not have followed a trail with more perfect accuracy and comprehension of every mark and line, than could Chick.

The displacement of a leaf from its original resting-place after its fall from the tree even if it had moved only the fraction of an inch; the bending of a twig where the foot of a passing person had pressed upon it, even without breaking it; the broken strands of a spider's web, where once it had stretched from bough to bough, or from tree to tree, but where it now hung forgotten and deserted because a body in passing that way had demolished it—all such evidences of the passing of a human being were as print to the young detective, and he read them as such.

And so it was, that although thirty-four or thirty-five hours had lapsed since Nick Carter had passed that way, Chick was enabled to follow his trail as accurately as if it had been only a few hours old.

He gave no thought to the flight of time. He paid no heed to what was going on around him.

His whole attention was absorbed by his occupation, and his mind was concentrated upon that alone, to the exclusion of all things else.

And the trail led him straight away through the woods, over a gentle rise of ground at first, then along the side of a gully, thence down through a swampy section where it was distinctly easy to follow.

There, upon a square section of solid ground, Nick seemed to have stopped and waited; and also, it seemed to the assistant, that he had been busily occupied about something while he had stood there, although Chick could not see that his chief had encountered another person.

Still, there were many footprints around that spot, as if the detective had been busily engaged in some occupation during his halt.

Chick examined the place carefully and studied it for a long time, unmindful of the fact that darkness was rapidly descending upon him; but at last he determined to follow the trail *from* there and not to try longer to determine why Nick had halted at all.

To his surprise, the track showed that the detective had turned abruptly back again toward the place where he had left his two friends in the automobile, although by a somewhat different route.

"I suppose he was attacked while on his way back to the machine," mused Chick. "He came this far, and decided that he was on a wild-goose chase; and—well, I must give it up for the night. It is getting too dark for me to see."

He glanced around him to discover some rise of ground, where he could build a fire and pass the night, for he was determined not to leave the spot until he had followed that trail as far as it would lead him, when suddenly, and without a bit of warning, there came the sharp report of a pistol from the forest to the left of him, and he fancied that he heard the droning of a bullet as it sung its way just over his head among the trees.

CHAPTER IX.

CONFRONTED BY THE BANDIT.

The report of the pistol—or rifle, for Chick could not in that instant determine which it was—effectually startled him out of his reverie and brought him back with a jerk to the stern realities of his surroundings.

His first instinct—and this was also the result of his Western training—was to put a tree between himself and the place from which that bullet had come, and this he did instantly; and it seemed to him only just in time, too, for he had scarcely hidden himself safely behind the tree when a second bullet plowed through the branches just over his head.

"Humph!" thought the young detective. "Either that chap is a mighty poor shot, or else he didn't try very hard to hit me. I presume the former is the true explanation. The second shot was a better one, but even that was wide of the mark."

While he was thus commenting, a third bullet struck with a sullen thud against the trunk of the tree behind which he was hiding—and this time Chick thought he located the spot from which it had proceeded.

He took a chance at it, anyhow, for reaching out his right arm, he fired in return, although he could see nothing to shoot at.

The return shot seemed to have the desired effect, however, for no more bullets were fired at him; and although he waited in his place behind the trunk of the tree until night had settled and the woods were quite dark, he neither saw nor heard another sign of his foe, or foes.

"I reckon that incident rather alters my former plans," he mused to himself. "It would hardly be safe to build a fire near here, and to settle myself to sleep for the night, after that little exchange of pleasantries—and there is not another thing that I can accomplish here, before morning. That island in the ravine, where I adopted this disguise, is about the place for me, I reckon."

He waited yet awhile longer, and then began slowly to make his way out of the wood, and finally, after an hour of toiling through the darkness, he descended over the bridge into the ravine and finally came to the island where he had so changed his general appearance.

Here, he did not hesitate to make himself comfortable, for he was certain that he had not been followed; and having started a fire, he unslung the leather game-bag which hitherto he had carried across one of his shoulders, and presently was engaged in preparing himself a savory supper from its contents.

After that he made himself a bed of boughs and presently composed himself to sleep as calmly as if he had been ensconced in his bed at the Mammoth.

At daylight he was astir again, and having partaken of a breakfast hastily prepared, he returned forthwith to the wood where he had lost the trail because of the darkness, and to the very spot where he had stood when the shots had been fired at him.

But here two surprises awaited him.

The first was in the form of a piece of white birch bark which had been pinned to the trunk of the tree behind which he had hidden.

There was writing upon it—a scrawl, rather, which he was, however, able to read; and it was as follows:

"giT OuT uv heAr If yOu dOnt yOu wiLL bE KiLLeD."

Chick read the remarkably prepared message, smiled, and left it where it was, fastened to the tree.

The second surprise came when he undertook to take up the trail where he had dropped it when darkness fell upon him the preceding night.

There was no longer any trail to follow—or, rather, there were so many trails that it was an utterly hopeless task to attempt to follow the original one.

It was plain to Chick that the person or persons who had fired the shot at him had approached the spot after he was gone, and then had deliberately made trail after trail through the woods.

They had gone up and down, this way and that, and in every direction, so that the original trail was entirely defaced; and they had doubled on their own trails, walked backward, entered brooks and pools of water in the swamp place before referred to, until there remained no hope that Chick could accomplish anything at all by following out his original plan.

He gave it up calmly, and seated himself to think out a new plan.

He forgot that he was exposing himself to a possible shot from his enemy of the preceding night; or, if he remembered it, he took no heed of the circumstance.

But none came.

The wood seemed to be deserted save for his own presence there, and after a considerable time spent in thought, he rose to his feet and hurried toward the spot from which he believed the shots had been fired at him.

He found it without much difficulty.

Behind a tree which was not unlike the one that had afforded him shelter, he discovered the footprints of a man—and it was the place where the apparent would-be assassin had stood at the time he fired at Chick.

But here again Chick was destined to encounter disappointment.

The person or persons who had visited the wood since he was there—and he was satisfied that the new tracks had been made that morning—had taken care to obliterate their own tracks as well as that old one of Nick's which Chick had been trying to follow.

For a time Chick believed that by making a wide detour he could strike one of the tracks where it had entered the wood, and so could find something which would lead to some destination; but he was speedily undeceived about that idea, for the mysterious strangers had left him nothing of the kind to discover.

It was noon when he came to this determination, and he was then upon the top of a knoll which was covered by a grove of old growth pines, immensely high and stately,

On one side of the knoll stretched the woods through which Chick had already passed, and where he had discovered so much and so little; on the other side was a steep bank which led down into a ravine not unlike the one where he had passed the night, and which, after a careful study of it, he determined was the same.

He concluded, then, to climb the tallest of the trees and to study from the height thus attained the surrounding neighborhood; and this he did at once.

He saw from his perch that the ravine was the same as the one where he had passed the night; that it made an abrupt turn at right angles half-a-mile below him, and then crossed the highway at the bridge where he had parted with Doremus.

He studied it in the opposite direction, then, and saw that it led straight backward among the hills, appearing to delve deeper and deeper into the earth as it advanced.

"Nick's country place is somewhere up in that direction," he mused as he descended to the ground. "I wonder if this is the same ravine that partly crosses his land and comes to an end half-a-mile beyond his house; *and I wonder*—if somewhere among the rocks that form its sides, I will not be apt to find the hiding-place of those bandits?"

There was no use whatever in waiting where he was, inactive; and so, presently, he descended to the bottom of the ravine and began to make his way along it.

He had moved along in this manner for about half-a-mile when he was startled by the sound of a shrill whistle from the rocks high above his head, and he came to an abrupt halt as he raised his eyes aloft to discover whence the sound had proceeded.

Chick was not left in doubt on that point.

Half-way up the sheer side of the precipice a shelving rock jutted out over the abyss beneath, and grouped upon it stood three men, each with a rifle aimed at Chick's heart.

"If you move a finger, you will be a dead man that instant," called out a voice, which evidently proceeded from a fourth person who could not be seen from where Chick stood.

But he was not long left in doubt as to the source of it, for at that instant the individual who had been so graphically described by Doremus as "the opera bouffe bandit" stepped out into full view upon the ledge.

He was dressed exactly as Doremus had described him, with the difference that he now seemed to be unarmed; at least he had no weapon that could be seen.

"Put your hands above your head!" ordered the bandit chief quietly.

Chick obeyed, for those three men with rifles had the drop on him, and they looked as if they would not hesitate to shoot—if they were told to do so.

"Who are you and what do you want?" demanded the chief, now.

"Me wanta da wiz," replied Chick, imitating to perfection the talk of an Italian who did not understand English any too well.

"Oh, talk United States," was the next, and rather taunting, remark from the chief.

"Me talka da Inglis, signor," said Chick, unabashed. "You no hear me saya da words?"

"Can't you talk any better English than that?"

"No. Me talka da best I can."

"What do you want here, anyhow?"

"Me wanta da wiz; no?"

"What do you mean by the wiz? What are you talking about?"

"Da wiz. He hava da hunch about him. Mebby you are da wiz; no? Meester! Do you spika da Italian?"

"Yes."

"Ah!" said Chick, in the Italian language, instantly. "That is better. Now I can talk to you, if you will hear me."

"Do you mean to say that you are a real Italian and that you cannot understand English any better than you pretend?" demanded the chief in the same tongue.

"Oh, I understand English all right, but I cannot speak it. It twists my tongue out of shape. It is a heathenish language. I prefer my own. Are you 'The Wizard of the Highway'?"

"What do you know about 'The Wizard of the Highway,' anyhow?"

"Ha! What do I know? I know nothing; but I have been told that he is a bandit from my own country. I wish to see him. To talk with him. To ask his protection, and to give my services to him in return for it, if he will receive me. You are he, I know, and——"

"Shut your noise. How do you suppose I am to get a word in, if you jabber on like that? Who told you about the wizard?"

"Many people. I hear about him everywhere. I seek to find him."

"What induced you to search around here for him?"

"Ha! If you will tell me that you are the bandit, I will answer."

"Very well. I am Fillipo, the bandit—commonly called 'The Wizard of the Highway.' Now, what induced you to search here for me?"

"I will tell you. The day before yesterday I was sleeping in the grass, in the early morning, just where a narrow road leads out of the woods upon the highway. I was awakened by the approach of an automobile. It came close to me, and stopped. Then it turned into the narrow road, and disappeared through the woods. I waited where I was. After almost an hour, it came back again. When it went into the wood, there were three men in it; when it returned, there were only two—and they were greatly excited and frightened. The automobile stopped again, where it had turned off from the highway, and I heard the two men talking. I heard talk about a bandit who had stepped down out of an opera; I heard them say that the man who had been with them was now a prisoner, held for ransom, in the power of the bandit. Then they passed on, out of sight and out of hearing.

"But I took the trail, and followed them by the marks their wheels left on the roadway.

"I followed them to where they had found another machine drawn up at the side of the road, and I saw where both machines had gone through a gate toward a great house in the private park beyond.

"Then I waited. I did not dare go to the house, for, if I am seen, I will be recognized and arrested, and put in prison—and afterward hanged; but I waited.

"After a long time the automobile—not the same one, but with the same two men, and also with three ladies—came out of the gate, and went away; and then I got to thinking. I said to myself that this bandit must be the wizard I have heard so much about. I will go into the wood, and try to find him. When I have done so, I will tell him of the crimes I have committed, and that even now there is a price on my head, and perhaps he will let me join his band, or, at least, he will permit me to hide away for a few weeks, until the pursuit is over, and I may make my escape. That is my story, signor."

CHAPTER X.

NICK CARTER'S CAVERN CELL.

Chick was both surprised and chagrined when, at the end of his story, the bandit chieftain burst into uncontrollable laughter; and the young detective fancied that he could detect a grin stealing over the faces of the three men who still held the rifles pointed at his heart.

"You do not believe?" he called out, still speaking in Italian.

"I believe that you have told me a pack of lies—yes," was the reply.

"It is the truth, signor—the truth!" protested Chick.

For reply, the bandit raised his right hand, and pointed over Chick's head, down the ravine.

"There lies your way," he said. "You should thank your stars that I do not kill you, and bury you here."

"You might as well do so as to send me adrift," replied Chick boldly.

"I shall count twenty," continued the chief, as if he had not heard. "When I have reached that number, if you are still within range of the rifles of my men, you will be shot."

"I shall not stir from where I stand," asserted Chick.

"We will see, we will see," and the bandit began to count.

"One, two, three, four, five"—Chick did not move. "Six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen"—Chick had not altered his position. "Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen"—the chief stopped counting.

"Why don't you say twenty—and shoot?" demanded Chick.

"Don't you believe that I will order the men to shoot?"

"I do not care whether you do or not."

"You are resolved to remain?"

"Yes; or die where I stand."

"Wait, then, where you are."

The chief stepped backward out of sight beyond the edge of the rocks, and then, as suddenly as he had disappeared, his men followed him; and Chick stood gazing upward at the spot where the men had stood, but which now seemed only a projection of barren rock.

He did not move. He waited. He believed that he had adopted the right course, and he was resolved to see the thing out, as he had started it.

Ten, twenty minutes, and then half-an-hour passed without a sign of the chieftain or his men appearing again on the ledge—but Chick still waited patiently.

A second half-hour went by in the same manner, and then another one, so that he had actually stood there an hour and a half, and had about made up his mind that the bandit did not mean to show himself again at all, when he suddenly appeared on the ledge.

"I see that you are still there," he called.

"You told me to wait; I have waited."

"So I see. How long a time would you have remained there?"

"Until you appeared again."

"Suppose I should not have appeared again at all—what then?"

"Then I should have rotted here, where I stand. You told me to wait. I obey."

"Ho, ho! That is good. It is a boast. What is your name?"

"I have no name. I left the one I used to wear at another place. I have forgotten it."

"How shall I call you, then?"

"By any name you please. One will serve as well as another. I will answer to one as well as to another, and, whatsoever name you give to me, that will I wear so long as I am with you. Otherwise, I will have no name."

"Then I will call you Perro."

"Perro be it."

"It is the Spanish word for dog."

"It will serve as well as another."

"Are you armed, Perro?"

"Yes."

"With what?"

"Shall I show you?"

"Yes."

"Look, then. I have this. See?"

Chick produced the dagger, and waved it aloft.

"And this."

He drew one of the revolvers, showed it, and laid it on the ground in front of him.

"And this."

The second revolver followed the first, and was placed beside the dagger and its mate; and then Chick folded his arms, and drew back a step.

"Have you no other arms or weapons of any kind?" asked the bandit.

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"I have two more pistols."

"Where are they?"

"In my sleeves."

"Show them."

"I will do so. Will you permit me to exhibit them in my own way?"

"Yes."

Chick stepped forward, and picked up one of the big revolvers from the ground. He raised the hammer as high as it would go, and then grasped the weapon by the muzzle.

"You will observe how I hold this revolver?" he said to the bandit.

"Yes," was the reply; and Chick thought he detected the ghost of a smile on the chieftain's face. But if it was there at all, and Chick was not certain about it, he attributed it to derision, and nothing else.

"You observe that there is no other weapon in my possession—apparently—than this one, do you not?"

"Yes."

"You have asked me to show you the remaining two weapons that I carry—and I will show them to you by throwing this one into the air, and then, while it is whirling above my head, I will fire at it with one of the pistols that you do not see, and I will aim so straight and so surely that the bullet I fire will hit the trigger of this weapon, and so discharge it. Do you comprehend?"

"Yes; but you cannot do it."

"You shall see. Watch me."

Chick took one step backward, and then, with a quick motion, threw the big revolver into the air in such a manner that it was sent high above his head. And then, just at the instant that it poised, ready to descend again to the ground, he extended his right arm, and thus throwing the pistol that was concealed in that sleeve into his hand, he fired at the revolver in the air.

Instantly there followed a second report, and the revolver in mid air was discharged.

He had made the wonderful shot of hitting the trigger of that whirling pistol, and that without appearing to take the slightest aim, and, moreover, without showing the pistol at all with which he had made such a wonderful shot, for it disappeared as soon as he discharged it.

And then, as he fired, he sprang forward and caught the other pistol as it fell, and, as calmly as if it were an ordinary, every-day occurrence, replaced it on the ground beside the other one.

The bandit on the ledge of rock watched him with a smile that was half amused; and then he drawled:

"A very fair shot. I know of only one other man who could do as well."

"And who is he? Yourself?" asked Chick, grinning, for he expected that the bandit would boast.

"No. I refer to one whom, perhaps, you do not know."

"Who is he? Nobody can shoot as well as I. I am the best in the world."

"Indeed! His name is Nick Carter."

"Peste! Nick Carter! *Sacristi!"*

"Ah! You know him?"

"Aye, to my sorrow."

"You do not like him?"

"I hate him. It was he who sent me to——"

"Be careful, Perro. Don't lie, now."

Chick shrugged his shoulders, and was silent. He was obliged to confess to himself that the bandit on the ledge puzzled him mightily; and he waited until the bandit spoke again.

"Return your weapons to your pockets," he said; and Chick obeyed.

"Now," continued the chieftain, "if you would still join with me here, climb up to this ledge."

He stepped backward as he ceased speaking, and immediately the three men appeared in view again, and one of them threw the end of a rope ladder to the ground in front of the spot where Chick was standing.

Instantly, the young detective stepped forward and seized upon it, and, the next moment, he was climbing rapidly toward the top.

He had no idea what awaited him when he should arrive there, but he was satisfied in his own mind that he had found the place where Nick Carter was detained a prisoner, and also the men who were holding him for ransom.

It was quite a climb to the top of the ledge, for the dis-

tance was at least fifty feet; but he reached it at last; and then, as his head and shoulders projected over the edge, the men on the top seized him, and drew him up quickly.

But, at the same time, one of them threw a blanket over his head. Another fell upon him, and held him down, while the third bound him firmly with ropes.

But Chick offered no resistance.

He permitted himself to remain passively in their hands until he was thoroughly bound, and thus rendered utterly and entirely helpless.

When they had bound him so that he could not move, one of them thrust a bandage over his eyes after removing the cloak with which they had covered his head, and, thus hoodwinked and tied, they lifted him and carried him away somewhere—he could not tell where.

He believed, however, that they had entered a cavern of some kind.

He could determine that by the odor of earth that was around him, and by the sensation of dampness which is always present in caverns, and which cannot be duplicated anywhere else.

It seemed to him that they made innumerable turns and twists as they bore him forward, and that they strode on interminably; and always they went ahead in utter silence, as if they had suddenly been stricken dumb.

At last they stopped to rest, and he felt that they put him down upon the hard rock while they took breath.

"One would suppose that this were the mammoth cave of Kentucky," murmured Chick, for the men had not gagged him.

But he received no reply other than an audible chuckle from one of them. And then they lifted him up again, and started on their journey a second time.

On and on they went again, with the same number of turns and twists, and, after another quarter of an hour passed in that manner, they stopped to rest a second time.

"Aren't you almost there?" asked Chick. "I should think it would be easier for you to make me do my own walking."

He was vouchsafed no reply; but in a moment they picked him up again, and then, after a short interval, he was thrust through a doorway, the bonds on his wrists were severed, he heard a door clang shut behind him, and he was left to his own devices.

It was the work of only a moment to tear the bandage from his eyes, and the bonds from his ankles; and then, as he started to his feet rather dizzily, he perceived that he was inside a cell-like subterranean vault, and that it was separated from another one by an iron grating. He saw, too, that his own prison chamber was without a light, but that the one beyond it was provided with a candle that was half burned.

And then, as he stepped forward and peered through the grating into the other cell, he uttered a short, quick, startled cry.

Stretched upon an iron cot, almost within his reach, was the motionless and apparently lifeless body of Nick Carter.

CHAPTER XI.

THE IMPRISONMENT OF CHICK.

In that instant, so great was Chick's surprise, and so great was his fear lest his beloved chief were really dead, that he forgot utterly his surroundings, and he permitted himself to cry out.

"Nick! Nick!" he called. "Are you living? Speak to me, for God's sake!"

There was no reply from the cot whereon the detective was lying; but instantly there came a chorus of laughter from somewhere behind Chick, and he wheeled in his tracks to discover that the door of his own cell was open, and that three faces were peering in at him.

With a cry of rage, he leaped toward them; but, ere he could reach them, the door was slammed shut, and he was again alone.

But he realized thoroughly the folly of what he had done.

He knew that he had betrayed himself.

He understood that, no matter how well he had played his part up to that point, all his efforts had been in vain, since now his captors could not help knowing that he had recognized Nick Carter.

Then he turned back again, determined to attempt to call his chief to life—but it was only to find that, while his back had been turned, a door had been closed across the grating which separated the two cells, and that he could no longer peer into the one adjoining.

He pounded frantically against the place where the opening had existed but a moment before—pounded and called aloud, for he realized now that there was no further necessity for attempted concealment as to his identity—but he received no response whatever; beyond that wall, which he knew was all that separated him from Nick Carter, all was silence.

Chick felt himself to be utterly helpless in the hands of the enemy.

He had deliberately placed himself in the power of the bandit; had permitted himself to be bound and blindfolded; had allowed himself to be entirely disarmed; for, while they were binding him, they had relieved him of *all* his weapons, so that he now had not so much as a toothpick with which to defend himself—and now he was a hopeless prisoner, and his identity was known.

A candle burned dimly in one corner of his prison room, and by its light he discovered an iron bedstead and mattress in one corner of the apartment. He seated himself upon this, and, with his face buried in his hands, gave himself up to temporary despair.

He kept no count of the flight of time.

He only knew that, after a long while, his cell door was opened, and that, while two men remained outside the threshold with rifles pointed at his heart, another entered the room with a small table, upon which he had arranged something to eat.

The man left the table there, and withdrew without uttering a word, and Chick was again left alone to his meditations.

Somehow, he knew when night came, by the utter quiet of the place, although there was but little change at that. Still, he composed himself to sleep as best he could.

In the morning, he was awakened by the coming of his jailers, who arranged themselves as they had done in the evening, while he was served with his breakfast; and, after that, he was not disturbed again for many hours, although toward night, when the evening meal was brought to him, the man who delivered it also cared for his cell, and even left with him a bundle of blankets for the bed.

Chick made an effort to converse with his jailers that evening; but he could not elicit any response to his questions; they came and they departed in utter silence—and so passed the second night of his captivity.

The third, the fourth, and the fifth followed it in exactly the same manner, and, as he had taken great care to keep count of the days, he knew that Wednesday had come, for it had been during the day of Friday that he had given himself up as a prisoner.

He remembered, now, that on Wednesday, between six and seven o'clock in the morning, the first instalment of ten thousand dollars was to be paid—was to be deposited at the foot of the old tree—and he wondered if Doremus would attend to it, now that he, Chick, had so mysteriously and entirely disappeared.

He remembered also that, in one week more, the day for his wedding would dawn; and presently, when the men came with his breakfast, he prayed that he might be allowed to send some sort of a message to Leila Loring, his fiancée.

"I will write nothing that will tell where I am, or by whom I am detained a prisoner," he pleaded. "Only let me send her some word—anything."

Utter silence was his reply.

"I wonder if you men mean to drive me mad," he said to them, as they left the room. "You had best beware, for I tell you plainly that I am getting desperate."

But the door was closed, and the men departed without replying by so much as a word, and he was again alone.

Time after time during that week he had begged to be allowed to look into the adjoining cell, where for a moment only, after his arrival, he had seen the figure of Nick Carter; but, to his pleading, the same silence had always been preserved.

He had finished his breakfast this morning, and about an hour had passed, when the door outside the grating of his cell was thrown open, and one of his jailers motioned to him to approach.

Then, when he had grasped the bars, and was peering out into the dimly lighted corridor, the man pointed downward toward an open canvas bag, which was almost filled with shining, golden double eagles; and Chick knew that Doremus had kept his part of the agreement, and had paid the first instalment of the ransom money.

He attempted to ask a question, but the door was closed in his face, and his jailers departed with the gold, and again he was left alone with his thoughts; and he was not again disturbed until his supper was brought to him that evening; for he had never been allowed more than two meals a day since he had been there.

Thus Wednesday came and went; and Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday following it.

Monday morning, when his breakfast was served, his jailer left him a part of one of the daily papers; and he even pointed toward a heading before he took his departure.

Chick seized the paper as soon as he was alone, and, holding it close to the light of the candle, he read an account of how the mysterious bandit and highwayman, called "The Wizard of the Highway," had lately committed another outrage, and had added abduction to his list of crimes; and then, with a gasp of horror, he saw, in the account, the name of the woman he loved—Leila Loring.

The article filled more than a column of the paper, but the purport of it was—and this Chick read with staring eyes—that Mr. James Doremus had been again held up on the highway, when he had with him his own wife and two other ladies, one of the latter being Miss Loring; and it related how, after the people had been robbed of their valuables, the bandits had deliberately ridden away with the automobile, taking with them into captivity Miss Leila Loring; and it closed by saying that the big Mercedes automobile had soon afterward been abandoned at the side of the road near the scene of the greatest activities of "The Wizard of the Highway," but that the young lady, "who was soon to be married to Mr. Chickering Carter," had not been seen or heard from since that time.

"My God!" he thought. "It was near here that they captured her. Can it be possible that Leila is also a prisoner in this mammoth cavern?"

Contrary to his usual custom, the jailer did not return that morning, for the breakfast dishes—nor did he appear when the day had passed, and it was time for the evening meal.

It seemed to Chick, then, that the cavern had been deserted, and that he had been left there to starve.

In the middle of the night that followed, when his last candle was half burned away, Chick made up his mind

that he had, indeed, been left to his own devices, and, hesitating no longer, he seized the case-knife which had been served with his food, and cast about him to select the best spot in his cell for digging his way to freedom.

There was a wide, flat stone set in the ground where the door opened upon the corridor, but at the opposite side of the cell, where the grating—backed up by a door on the opposite side of it—separated him from the adjoining cell in which he had seen Nick Carter the day of his arrival, there seemed to be nothing to prevent him from digging his way out.

He attacked it without more hesitation, and was surprised to find that the task was apparently an easy one.

Within half-an-hour, he had made a hole so deep that he could reach under the door, and so, bracing himself and holding to the grating with his hands, he finally, by kicks and pushes, forced the door open.

The grating still remained, but, by digging around it, he soon had it loosened, and, within two hours from the time he began his task, he had worked his way into the adjoining cell.

In his excitement, he did not stop to consider how easy the task had been. If he had done so, it would have seemed to him almost as if the way had been left open purposely for him to make his escape; and, even as it was, he thought what a fool he had been not to have attempted to get free before.

And more surprises awaited him as he advanced.

The door leading from this second cell into the corridor had not even been fastened, and he opened it without resistance; again, in the corridor, a half-burned candle was shedding its feeble light about the place, and he stared about him in amazement—for here was his third surprise.

He had supposed, all the time, that he was a prisoner in an immense cavern in the hills, for he recalled the almost interminable distance that he had been carried when he was brought there, bound and blindfolded

But now he saw that it was really no cavern at all; on the contrary, it was merely a fissure in the rocks; he could see the starlight above him, where the cliffs approached each other so closely that they almost touched; and he could see that the supposed two cells, in one of which he had been detained a prisoner, were merely created by a partition which divided a hut that was built of stone with the cavities stuffed tightly with moss and earth.

He was still upon the ledge over the ravine, and not a hundred feet from it; and he realized that, when the bandits had placed him in the cell a prisoner, they had walked around with him in their arms in order to create the impression that they were carrying him a great distance.

He could see everything upon the ledge from where he stood, and he realized that the rendezvous of the bandits was, indeed, deserted, save for himself.

To add to his surprise, as he hastened toward the front of the ledge, he stumbled over something in his path, and discovered that all his weapons were there—the spiral-spring pistols, the two big revolvers, and the dagger.

More, the rope ladder by which he had ascended to the ledge was in place; there was actually no impediment in his pathway to escape.

Still, he hesitated.

It all seemed so easy that he was not sure it was not a trap, and that he would be shot from ambush; but second thought convinced him of his error, for, if they had wished to kill him, it would have been an easy matter to have accomplished it while he was still a prisoner, instead of not only leaving the way open for his escape.

A huge silver watch with which Chick had provided himself as an adjunct to his disguise was still in his possession, and he saw, by glancing at it, that daylight would be upon him in a few moments. Indeed, it was already growing lighter in the ravine, and he extinguished the candle he had carried with him, preparatory to seizing upon the rope ladder, and making the descent to the bottom of the ravine.

He had taken a step forward, and the rope of the ladder was actually in his grasp, when he was startled by the sound of voices proceeding from the ravine below him, and, crouching down out of sight, he waited and watched.

A moment only passed, when he perceived three men, dimly outlined in the gray dawn that stole into the ravine, approach stealthily from the denser shadow of the trees, and make their way slowly toward the dangling ladder.

"The bandits are returning," was his first thought; and then he reached forward to draw up the ladder, so they could not ascend by it; but he thought better of it, and left it where it was, while he crouched still lower, and awaited their approach.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CAPTURE OF THE WIZARD.

Chick could hear quite plainly what the men were saying, and rather to his surprise, they not only conversed in English, but their voices were different from those he had heard while he had been a prisoner; the subject of their discourse was astonishing, too, for the foremost of them said:

"This is the place, boys. We will soon see who this fake 'Wizard of the Highway' is, and what he is. I'll teach him to poach upon my preserves. Hello! They have left the door open for us; there is a rope ladder danging from that ledge. See it?"

With an added word of caution, the man who was evidently the leader of the three stepped forward, followed by his companions, and seized the ladder.

Chick noticed the strain that was upon it, and knew

that the man was slowly ascending, and he braced himself for the combat which must soon follow, for he was determined to attack the man the instant he came within reach.

And he had not long to wait.

After a few moments, the head and shoulders of the leader appeared over the ledge, and then he drew himself entirely upon it.

The instant he was within reach, Chick leaped forward.

He seized the man in such a manner that he prevented him from crying out, and together they fell to the floor of the ledge, making no sound that could be heard by the others, who were already ascending.

But Chick had not reckoned upon the great, almost gigantic, strength possessed by the man he had attacked, for he was the young assistant's equal in every way, and, left to themselves, it would have been almost an even struggle, while Chick would doubtless have been the victor in the end; but, as it was, the two companions of the stranger soon came to his aid, and, before the struggle had proceeded to a definite point, Chick received a blow upon his head which effectually silenced him—and, some moments later, he opened his eyes to discover that he was again firmly bound, and that the three men were seated around him, awaiting his recovery.

Not one of them was masked; none of them wore any sort of costume more than common clothing, and they were all dark-visaged, rough-looking men, who might well be taken for footpads.

"So," said the man who was evidently in command, the instant that Chick opened his eyes, "you're the fellow who's been stealing my thunder, are you?"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Chick, still somewhat dazed by the effects of the blow he had received.

"You're the chap what thinks you can be another 'Wizard of the Highway,' are you? I've just come here, my hearty, to have it out with you. I've been watching this place for a week, and yesterday, when four of the party went away, I made up my mind that there wouldn't be many left here to put up a fight—and, besides, Nick Carter has been making it so hot for me over in Jersey that I had to find another place to hide for awhile."

"Nick Carter!" exclaimed Chick. "I thought he was your prisoner."

"My prisoner!" the man laughed brutally. "I wish he was. I'd slit his throat in a jerk of a lamb's tail. You hear me."

"Who are you?" demanded Chick, perceiving that there was a mistake somewhere.

"Who am I? I'm the real, genuine 'Wizard of the Highway'—that's who I am. And you're the impostor; the fellow who's been living on my reputation; a-scarin' folks to death, stealing automobiles, and abductin' women! You jackass! Don't you know that, when you swipe things like ten-thousand-dollar automobiles and pretty women, that you'll have the hull police outfits of the world down onto you? You're a fine kind of a highwayman, you are! You're a bloody fool, that's what you are, and I'm going to end your career right here. See?"

"What are you talking about?" demanded Chick. "Haven't you kept me a prisoner here, in this place, for almost two weeks? Haven't you——"

"No, I haven't! Shut up! You can't pull any wool over my eyes, my fine-feathered bird. I was a-makin' money all right, in my own legitimate way, until you started in the same business over here—and you have spoiled it all."

The man started to his feet, delivered a savage kick against Chick's anatomy, and then gruffly ordered his companions to "Git down that ladder again, and post yourselves on guard while I have it out with this chap"; and, while they were obeying him, a sudden light flooded Chick's comprehension.

"So," he said, adopting a new course, "you are the real wizard, are you; and you object to me? Is that the idea?"

The man rose to his feet again, scowling, and there was an ugly gleam in his eyes; and, as he approached Chick, the latter thought that the fellow was about to carry out his threat to slit his throat.

"Yes," he said surlily, "I'm the real wizard, if anybody should ask you. There ain't room enough in this locality for two of us; see? I'm no hog, but I think you are one. You're a purty tough-fibered young fellow, you are. You proved that a minute ago when you grappled with me, and now I'm going to give you a chance to lick me; see? If you can 'do' me, I'll serve under you, and you shall be chief, but, if I get the best of you, I'll be boss, and you've got to obey, or take the consequences; see?"

With a quick motion, he cut the bonds that held Chick a prisoner, and then leaped away from him.

"Square yourself now," he cried, "for, in about a holy minute, I'm going to throw you off the top of that ledge. See?"

Chick did not await a second bidding; and, indeed, the other man was already rushing toward him.

To describe the struggle that followed would be to give up pages to an account of a contest which lasted fully twenty minutes; for, at first, the two men seemed to be

equally matched, and the rush of the stranger was so quickly made that there was no opportunity to use fists in the encounter. They wrestled, and, with each move, they struggled nearer and nearer to the edge of the precipice.

But at last the moment came when Chick saw his opportunity.

By a dexterous twist of his ankle, he caught his antagonist in one of his favorite holds; then, bending backward, he exerted all his strength, with the result that the man who called himself the real wizard was sent spinning backward.

For just an instant he poised upon the edge of the rocky ledge, and then, with a loud cry, he fell over backward into the abyss beneath; and as Chick rushed to the edge to see what had become of him, fearing that he had indeed killed the man, he saw him tightly wedged in the top of a tree, half-way down—and unhurt, save for a few scratches.

To throw one end of the ladder out to him was the work of a moment, and then, as the man slowly mounted to the top, Chick stood waiting for him.

"Put out your hands," he said sternly, when the fellow was at the top, and could lean over and support his body on the rock. "If you don't, I will send you to the bottom with my heel. So. That is right"—and the young detective wound the rope, that had lately bound his own wrists, around the arms of his prisoner. Then he drew him upon the ledge, and pinioned his arms behind him.

This was scarcely accomplished when a shrill whistle sounded from below, and Chick saw that the two men who had gone down the ravine were approaching on a run.

He kept out of sight, and remained silent, waiting; and, one by one, they reached the ladder which Chick obligingly dropped again; and then, when the leading one came over the top of the ledge, the young detective tapped him on the head with the butt of a revolver—after which he awaited the arrival of the second man.

He was served in the same manner, and then, while Chick was binding them as he had bound their chief, and, just as he finished the task, the noise of other approaching footsteps startled him: and he saw—Nick Carter, followed by Patsy, Ten-Ichi, and James Doremus, running rapidly up the glen.

Advancing to the edge of the rock, Chick quietly presented two revolvers at them, and shouted "*Halt!*"

Nick Carter stopped in his tracks. Then he smiled.

"Hello, Chick!" he called out. "You are all right, are you?"

"So it seems," replied Chick dryly.

"And that bandit—the real 'Wizard of the Highway'—have you got him, too?"

"I've got the man who says he is the real thing; I also have two of his men—but I haven't yet got my claws on the man who has held me here, a prisoner, for almost two weeks, and has given me more real suffering than I ever experienced before in all my life. I think, however, that I see him at this moment directly in front of me, and—I don't quite know whether to shoot him—or to forgive him. What do you think about it?"

Nick Carter was silent a moment. Then he grinned.

"I think you had better forgive me, Chick; don't you? You see, I found it so hard for me to forgive you that I thought I would—well—just give you something to forgive, too. Now, wait a moment. Since you have been here, taking a—ahem!—a rest, as it were, I have been on the track of that fellow you have just captured. We made it hot for him over in Jersey, where he has been operating lately, and we caused all sorts of reports about this other wizard to get to him. Yesterday, he tried to light out, but I have tracked him and traced him here, where two of his men, whom we have captured, say that he came to have it out with the imitation wizard. I was afraid he would find you a prisoner in that little stone hut up there, and, believing that you were I, would murder you. That is why we were in such a hurry just now. That is the story in a nutshell; I'll give you the particulars later. Can I come up now?"

For reply, Chick threw down the end of the ladder.

"You see," said Nick, a little later, "that abduction was a fake, just as all this affair was a fake. I got the editors to put those accounts in the papers, more on account of the real highwayman than on yours, and it worked. He couldn't stand the idea of having another wizard of the highway than himself—and there he is.

"The fact is, Chick," the detective continued, rather apologetically, "Doremus and I concocted this whole thing just to test you. He was in the scheme from the start, and so were Pat and Ten-Ichi. We just wanted to have a little fun with you before your marriage, so I played the part of the Wizard of the Highway, and I hired some men, whom you could not possibly know, to do the rest. And this ravine is on my own land. Two

sons of the man who used to own the place built that stone hut when they were boys, and it seemed to me to be just the place to carry out the scheme. But I want to tell you one thing, Chick; that time out there in the woods, when you sent a bullet through the trees, it went through my hat, as well. It was a close shave for me. And, now, shall we shake hands? I have already given Doremus back his gold," and the detective laughed aloud.

"Tell me one thing," said Chick, still holding back.

"Oh, I know what it is without your asking," interrupted Nick. "I will answer it by telling you that, for the past week, Miss Loring has been my guest, with Mrs. Doremus, at this new place of mine, and that she is quite prepared to go through with the marriage ceremony tomorrow morning, in every particular save one. That one is, that the place of the wedding has been changed, and it is to take place at my house, instead of at the Hotel Mammoth—and a fresh lot of cards, notifying all your guests of the change, were long ago sent out by special messengers."

Moisture glistened in Chick's eyes as he stepped forward and held out his hand.

"Did you apply all this to me as a test of faith, Nick?" he asked.

"Oh, well, I suppose some people would call it that."

"Did you need to do so?"

"No, Chick; but there didn't seem to be any way of our getting together again without a long list of useless explanations, and so I thought that the easiest way would be to serve you a downright mean trick, so that you would have more to forgive than I. I knew that you would fly to my assistance, if I were in trouble; but, all the same, it was rather pleasant to realize how quickly you did it."

"Did you ever, for a moment, doubt that I would do it?"

"Never! Confound it! Don't you see the point? I judged you too hastily, and I wanted to put myself really in the light of being forgiven; and now, do you forgive me?"

A silent clasp of hands was the reply; but it was more eloquent than words.

* * * * * * * *

Chick and Leila Loring were married the following morning, at ten o'clock, on schedule time—and, later, the Wizard of the Highway went up the river for a protracted stay.

It is to be supposed now that the reader understands at last why Patsy and Ten-Ichi would take no active part in the rescue of Nick Carter. They knew that he did not need to be rescued. You see, Nick Carter had laid his plans so carefully that neither of the youthful assistants knew that Doremus was a confederate, and he, in his turn, did not know that they were in the game. And the part played by Nick and Doremus, at the time of the demand made for ransom, was carried out to the letter, in order that Hathorne would suppose it real—and talk about it.

THE END.

The next issue of the NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY—No. 479—will be "Abducted in Broad Day; or, Nick Carter's Duplicate Prisoner," out next week.

About the Early Numbers of

Tip Top Weekly

We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 900 are entirely out of print.

We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays."

We give herewith a complete list of all the stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored cover catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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